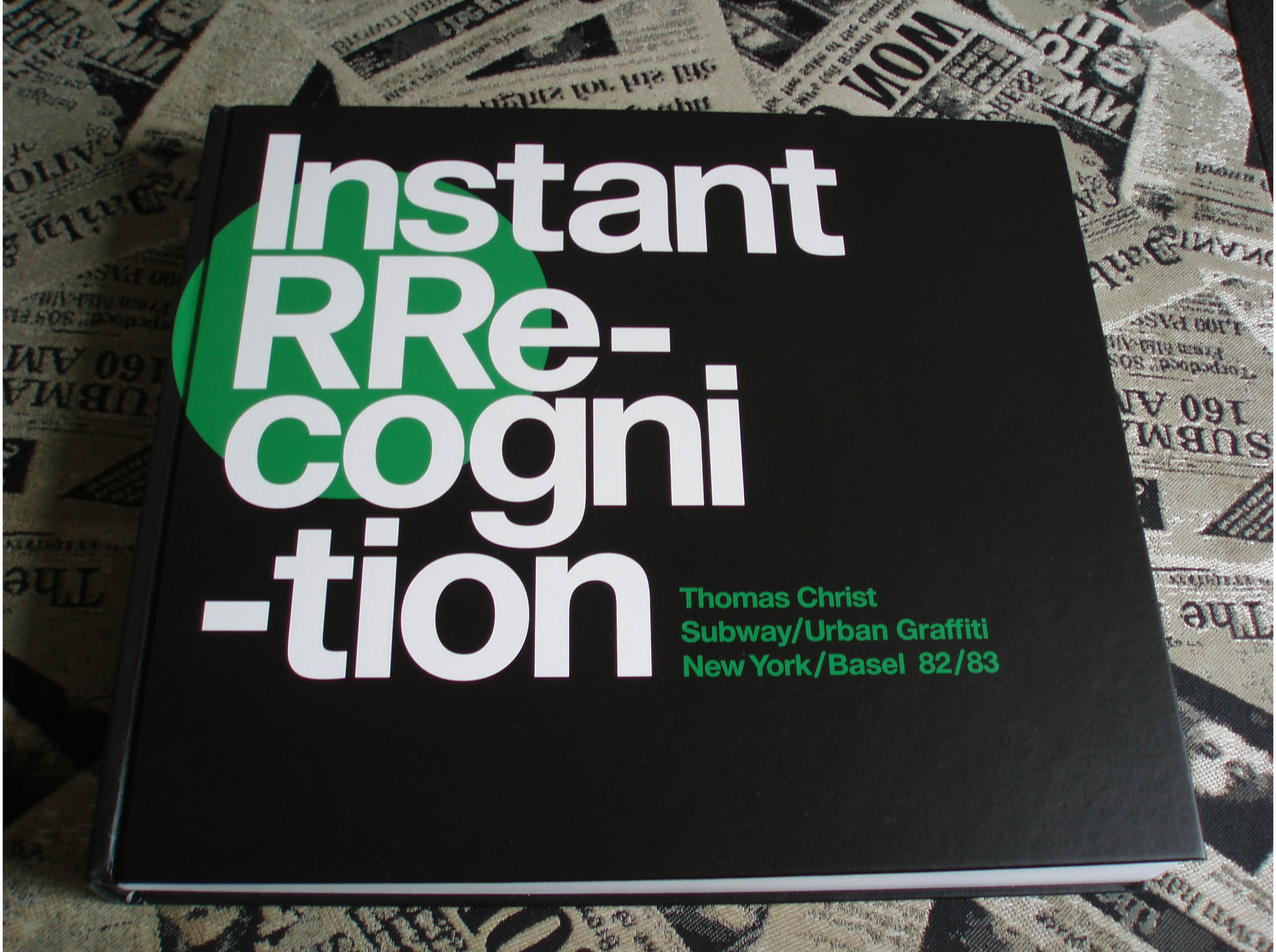

Instant
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Thomas Christ
Subway/Urban Graffiti
New York/Basel 82/83

Thomas Christ

Instant Recognition – New York / Basel 82/83

This book is dedicated to all the artists featured in this book



Contents

Foreword

"For me, to have gangs forming to make graffiti instead of to engage in violence is a unique sociological phenomenon."

New York in the 1980s: The metropolis is considered unsafe after nightfall – if not before. The crime rate is high. Hundreds of thousands of people flee the city. The primary cause of all this was the fatal interplay between cheap drugs, a boom in unemployment, the budget crisis of 1975, and a reduction of the police force. Not every part of the city was affected to the same extent, and tourists and visitors from around the world continued to come during this period. For a while, warning pamphlets were printed: "Welcome to Fear City" features tips about how to make it back out of New York happy (and alive). They include never riding the subway and never being out on the street after 6 p.m.

In 1982, the young Swiss lawyer Thomas Christ began his new job in Manhattan. A novel phenomenon soon stirred his interest. While the subway cars' interiors were filthy and filled with tags, elaborately designed lettering could be seen on their exteriors. He began taking pictures, but was unsatisfied with the results due to the lighting conditions and confined spaces of the underground subway stations. He decided to leave Manhattan and shoot his photographs in the Bronx, where the subway becomes an elevated train. There, he quickly came into contact with the writers, who told him about themselves and what they were doing. These mostly young men saw him as a chance to further increase the visibility of their revolt against oblivion. Christ began presenting and chronicling graffiti.

"I was convinced back then and am still convinced today that the graffiti movement is a unique art historical phenomenon ... I also knew back then that I had a unique collection of images of this ephemeral art ..."

Back in Switzerland again, he published *Subway Graffiti* (1984). This book contains not just numerous photos of painted subway cars but also theoretical reflections on a phenomenon that was still largely unknown in Switzerland and existed in a realm somewhere between art and criminality. His systematic treatment of the conditions specific to the production and reception of graffiti was ahead of its time, and his pictures were finally exhibited at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Basel in 1984. He was thus also a participant in a cultural transfer that still remains decisive today: the transmission of the hip-hop movement from New York to Europe. His photographs became an important point of reference for local writers and, because it was one of very few works that were even available at that time, the reproduced styles became an important source of inspiration.

Parallel to this, graffiti also made its first entry into the art world, with sales at the Art Basel, among other places. However, Christ remains largely unconvinced by the shift from illegal writing on trains to works serving as commercial commodities. This is due, in particular, to another movement that he discovered on the streets of New York: "urban graffiti" is his term for what is now known as "street art." In 1987 he published a second book, which complements and expands upon *Subway Graffiti*. In contrast to the heavily codified name writing on the subways, this *Urban Graffiti* seeks to convey a message. Its creators primarily address themselves not to their like-minded peers but to the broader public and they are, above all, schooled in the history of art. Although Christ emphasizes that subway graffiti and urban graffiti are two different worlds that derive their impetus and significance from entirely different sources, he also sees a connection:

"The common denominator is that we're dealing with art in the public space. 'Instant recognition' encapsulates this: both of them present themselves directly to the public and seek immediate attention."

Instant Recognition joins the two books together and supplements them with additional photos of New York subways and Richard Hambleton's *Shadowman* in Basel. In his introduction and an interview, Christ looks back on the period he spent in New York and the creation of *Subway Graffiti* and *Urban Graffiti*.

Rémi Jaccard and Thierry Furger

Quotes from the interview with Thomas Christ

Foreword

The birth of New York's hip-hop scene in the early eighties was and continues to be like a sociocultural earthquake: first taking over every means of communication and art form of the new, contemporary environment (rap, break dancing, and graffiti/street art), it soon captivated the whole world, particularly the major cities of the West. It is thus unsurprising that the art scene, particularly galleries and museums for contemporary art, tracked down the "seismographers" of this upheaval and attempted to present and commercialize the new art form. They had less success with the explosive, social, "bottom-up" culture of the subway graffiti sprayers than with the earliest protagonists of New York's street art, particularly the artists Haring, Basquiat, and Hambleton. While they were not sprayers, they displayed a great deal of admiration and affinity for the outburst of color coming out of the youth culture from the underprivileged ghettos of the South Bronx. While individual graffiti sprayers did occasionally find their way into a handful of galleries and even had their work shown and sold at the Art Basel 84, a genuine hype emerged around the "socially intelligible" artists of the new street art. Particularly in the case of Haring, this expanded into the form of a successful global marketing campaign that shattered all assumptions and expectations within a few months.

In the case of Hambleton, who was considered far less communicative and integrative than Haring, it took several more years for the breakthrough to arrive; however, among the individual artists, he is still seen today as the founder of what is known as "street art."

The phenomenon of this public appearance and this affinity to subway graffiti art (which has its own distinct sociopolitical background) also explain the reason why urban art – or, let us say instant art – represents a new art historical manifestation. It is not new for art to seek the public space: the painters of princes, kings, and dictators had already accomplished that. Instead, what is fascinating here is that street artists create their message directly in public and expose themselves to their public in an unfiltered manner. Thus, in the age of the "instant camera" (or "instant soup"), an "instant art" emerged. It demands not just "instant production" but also "instant recognition" – "instant reflection." Street art is always public, illegal, unsellable, and – typically – anonymous. The Harings in the subway stations and the Hambletons on

the street corners were never signed. Nonetheless, they quickly became so readily recognizable and their audience's enthusiasm became so persistent that the rule of anonymity was soon broken. Something very comparable revealed itself among the manifestos in color on the subway graffiti trains. Here, it was also less about the names of individuals than the readily recognizable logos or brands of gangs who sometimes battled one another, but chose to fight using the power of design and color instead of violence in their battle for survival. Victory on the journey through New York went not to those who were physically stronger, but to those who were graphically or artistically superior. Although these works were always joint efforts, the leaders behind the sometimes nearly illegible signatures soon enjoyed large groups of fans. As a result, the identities behind FUTURA, DAZE, MIDG, REVEN, POEM, etc. soon also became known.

In addition to all of this and to a greater degree than any other art form, the art of urban artists is characterized by an unknown lifespan, a non-negotiable expiration date, and an unpredictable half-life. These works face the vandalizing acts of rival groups, the intervention of the sanitation department, and the normal ravages of time. The possibility of photographic documentation thus possesses special significance for this art form, and this should therefore be mentioned here. However, the capturing of "street art" in a picture becomes a largely subjective perception: it positions the work within a very specific context, in deliberately selected lighting, or set within unique surroundings.

Like Haring and Hambleton, the legacy of the American graffiti artists and gangs recorded in this book will outlive its creators – mostly through enthusiastic (and occasionally equally talented) imitators in other Western cities. A handful have even managed to make their way into the art world. The photographic documentation offered by this illustrated volume now makes it clear where the source and power of these images is to be found. They were hardly conceived for a middle-class living room and, even at the galleries' shows, they seem like captured manifestos from another world: they lack the dialogue with their surroundings, the expression of that emotional aspect of the urban state of mind. Remarkably, however, this disconnection from their public surroundings, disregard for their cultural biotope, and what is really their castration is what has permitted their

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Thomas Christ, April 2022

Introductio

breakthrough. It is a familiar fact that the financial success of the graffiti sprayers was less enduring than that of the earliest street artists: Haring, Basquiat, and Hambleton, the latter of whom is still (rightly or wrongly) seen as the "Godfather of Street Art" today.
Within this context, the interest in a photographic documentation forty years after the birth of the "instant art" or "urban art" movement is gratifying and, based on its present resonance in the media, it is not just understandable but also important and pathbreaking considering the emergence of a new direction in art.

Thomas Christ, April 2022

Introduction

Subway Graffiti – New York 82/83

Graffiti in New York – Subway Subculture

The New York GRAFFITI scene has always been provocative. Today, after almost twenty years, its highly artistic refinement causes government authorities to devise equally refined means of suppressing it. This parallelism is no accident: GRAFFITI art has, from the start, been a means of self-realization as well as a way of fighting for survival.

GRAFFITI is a unique form of self-expression for the underprivileged youths in and around New York. Its origins lie in simple "paintings" – *graffiare:* to scratch – of adopted names that provide their authors with new identities. GRAFFITI "painters," or rather "writers," actually imitate the marketing methods of big companies by promoting their "products" or "brands." Their aim, however, is to compete with other members of their own social class and to impress them rather than to communicate with (or possibly to shock) society in general. The scene, then, has its own dynamics: "ergo-" or "ego-dynamics". Any kind of "social message" or criticism that it happens to convey is more of a by-product. But of course a relationship can be observed between these two elements. In spite of this, GRAFFITI cannot be compared with the political slogans on the walls of Europe's cities, because these concentrate on content (message), not on visual representation (image).

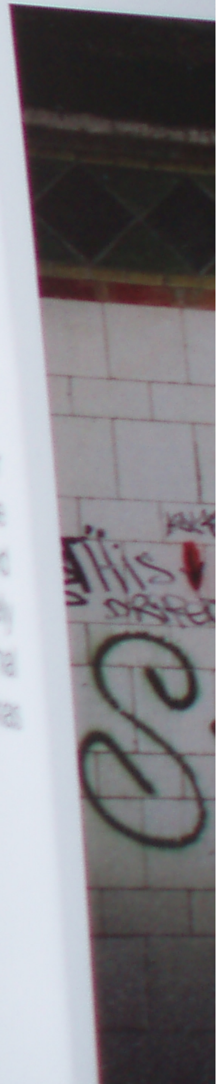
GRAFFITI is solely a picture of a name or of names; texts, if they occur at all, are either dedications or explanations of the sprayer's work. Its visual aspects, its elements of form are thus what most impresses us – they are so impressive, indeed, that GRAFFITI can be called an ART in its own right.

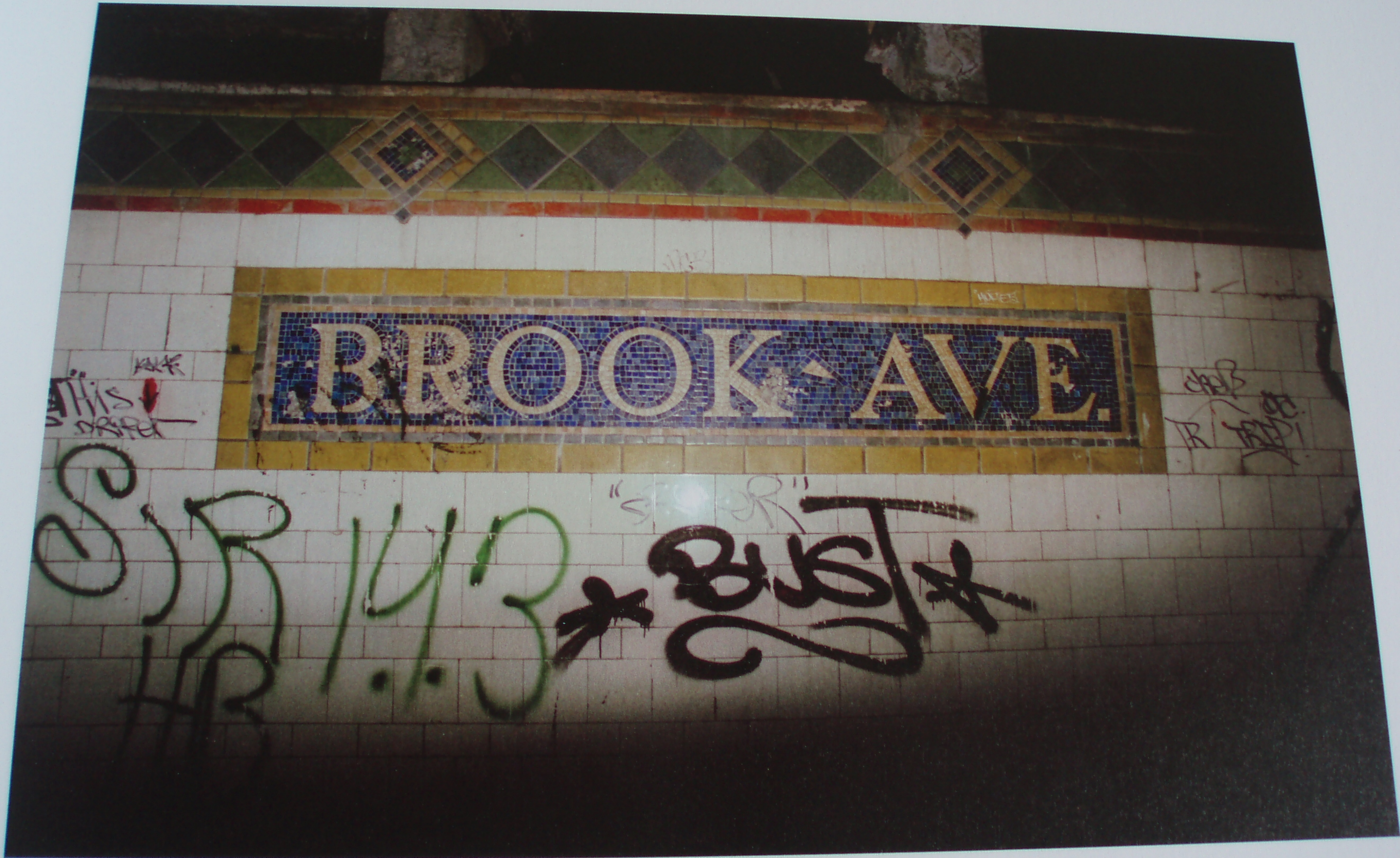




When these "letter-paintings" appeared for the first time on New York subway trains, they were clumsy and awkward, but still decipherable "children's drawings" – and also tests of courage. Today they have become very complex and complicated amalgams of sign and image, letter and form, sometimes illegible even to insiders. Those familiar with the scene will note the shift from name to sign, from monochrome to polychrome, from simple lettering to complex composition, and from individual to group work (without joint action, there can be no technical and no artistic success and, today, no sprayed work of art).

In the sketchbooks, called "black books," we find preparatory designs for "name-pictures," for new letter shapes or variations of old ones; we also discover the most extraordinary and precise feeling for color and color combinations and, very often, scale drawings of the works to be sprayed on the side of a subway car. Groups develop their own styles, which – though not immediately apparent to outsiders – can be distinguished by the colors of a painting or by the occasional comics (figures) that accompany it. A style, once chosen, must always be recognizable – it has to become something like a corporate image, a trademark.




BROOK AVE.


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Real spraying is only possible within well-organized groups, for a raid on a train is always a very risky venture. In the middle of the night, armed with sackfuls of cans of spray paint (their number having been carefully calculated beforehand, of course), the group sneaks into the tunnels or yards where the cars are parked, ready for use the next day. Then the sprayers start to work on the "outlining," i.e. the sketching, of the giant letters, which is followed by the application of thin layers of color in stripes, shapes, or "clouds" according to the intended effect. There is an element of danger in this: while pressing the button of the can, sprayers have to hold their breath, or sooner or later they will pass out. The most important features of the whole composition are then retraced in order to bring out highlights, intersections, and three-dimensional effects.






MIDE

A design, once chosen, must meet the eye again and again. In fact, the more often a "writer" has left his "mark," the better known he is and the more highly respected (which, as I was told, seems to be the most important thing to achieve). The fight for recognition follows certain set rules. The frequency of appearance of a "mark" and, more importantly, its artistic quality play a decisive role in evaluation. A sprayer who has risen to prominence according to these standards will be regarded as a "king" and enjoys the privilege of leaving his mark on the walls of the Hall of Fame, i.e. the yard of Junior High School 13 in Harlem, where the colorful pictographs of about thirty "kings" can be found. These "writings," unlike the ones in the subways, are no longer exposed to merciless competition and group fights. "Crossed out" or besmirched by no one, they are simply the subject of admiration; very rarely do they make way for a new one – and, if so, only on the basis of a gentleman's agreement. "Kings" grow up within their respective groups, whose glamorous trademark they become. Of course they are the idols of the younger members. Only those who master the art and technique of spraying (no dripping on the vertical surface, the sprayer's "canvas") and who eventually form their own style by combining new forms and colors will become famous. "Black book" exercises are insufficient: before "writers" attempt a "burner," they will have done a number of "facade frescoes" around the block.

The interiors of the subway cars also provide a painting ground. They often look like gro
overgrown with weeds – the weeds from the groups' felt-tip markers. Weeds, indeed, for quan
clearly dominates over quality. Here you can see the whole range, from well-known pictogra
to the autograph of a "king," but you will never find a four-letter word and only very few
political slogan. This feverish "indoor" activity helps to fill the time until a polychrome "bu
which takes weeks to prepare, can be executed: it has to be planned and designed in the "bla
book," the quantity of painting material has to be calculated carefully, and the sprayers hav
wait for the right weather conditions! During all this time, the promotion of the name mu
(in) ubiquity in the subways is its aim. Not to "sign" means to disappear from the scene in
anonymity of the masses.


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14TH STREET LINE



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Yet do not imagine a GRAFFITI sprayer, just because he grew up in the Bronx, to be the kind of tough guy that coolly conducts his raids! On the contrary: all the "writers" I met were teenagers between fourteen and eighteen, physically fit, and agile, but also highly sensitive and emotional. "To hit a train" and "to burn a car" are their terms for a raid that is planned in their "black books," their diaries. Considering the fact that, more often than not, their upbringing and environment lead to depravation and crime, their "colorful ego trips" must be regarded as impressive social as well as artistic achievements.

If we look at GRAFFITI art as a social phenomenon, we will also understand the struggles for power among the sprayer groups. These are rarely fought with violent means: the weapon used is color – color to cover the enemy's car, color to "cross out" his pictographs.

It is rather difficult for outsiders to fully understand or appreciate these spraying raids. Imagine painting a surface of over two hundred square feet within three to four hours – in pitch darkness! No corrections are possible, and it is unlikely the "writers" or "painters" will ever see their work again, unless they are extremely lucky. But then, they did not have the chance to look at it from a distance – and see it in its entirety – in the first place!

There are many more hazards to deal with. The difficult climbing expeditions to the upper parts of a car are regularly threatened by aggressive rats that terrorize even the most hardened sprayers. No less aggressive are the police dogs, which make their appearance about as often as the rodents, forcing the performing artists to make an extremely risky escape along and across the rails of the elevated track, which stands on heavy iron girders high above the streets of the outer boroughs. Here they have to try to avoid contact with the "third line" of the subway network, which is under current at tie level. These escapes often end in an accident – or worse.




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Single sprayers as well as groups act under a certain assumed name. I was initiated into the underworld mainly by the VIC (“Vandals in Control”). The uniqueness, frequency of appearance, and originality of their “image” – that is, their STYLE – was also of prime significance to them. Whoever came to abuse (or even simply use) it was quickly found out and pursued, despite the fact that this “thief” was actually helping to promote the group’s fame.

GRAFFITI art has never been within the bounds of legality. Yet this has not kept it from bei commercially exploited. American as well as European galleries are finding it more and mo attractive. It is debatable whether GRAFFITI art should leave the subways or if it can only achie its unique effect when it comes thundering right out of a tunnel, stunning onlookers in the nea station for no more than a few seconds before disappearing into the darkness again.






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The GRAFFITI artists themselves feel that mobility is not paramount. And if people from social backgrounds different from their own show interest in their "paintings," they take this as a sign of personal success. In 1981 the first exhibition of GRAFFITI art arranged by a gallery, known as "Graffiti Production Inc.," also became quite a success. Hundreds of young visitors, mainly from the Bronx, literally occupied the place, taking full advantage of the opportunity to talk shop and discuss their art in broad daylight. However, this well-intentioned gallery "occupation" kept many a customer or potential buyer away – and earned the gallery an unintended notoriety that eventually forced it to close down. Still, its owner was honored by a "burner" specially dedicated to her, which still runs on the Bronx line.

Since then, exhibitions of GRAFFITI art have been shown with great success all over the Western World (though not necessarily in New York City).

The young GRAFFITI artists know that their actions are illegal, but they maintain that laws are only man-made, and they believe that their colorful works really enliven the New York subways (whose rundown condition, by the way, is unparalleled in the world). Of course, the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) sees things differently – and declared war on the GRAFFITI scene some years ago, thus adding an unwanted element of crime to it. We fear the stage of escalation witnessed today is getting out of hand. There is escalation on both sides, of course: the heavier the retaliation, the greater the spraying euphoria.

The MTA has launched a twenty million dollar program, which includes schooling security personnel as well as training German shepherds to sniff spray paint. Furthermore, acids have been developed to remove the "writings" from the cars, and all subway yards are now protected by barbed-wire fencing and double-wire netting (they "are topped with razor-ribbon – the latest in barbed-wire technology – and in Corona, German shepherds patrol behind them," *New York Times*, April 8, 1983). The latest is a special white anti-GRAFFITI paint – 2,200 dollars a coat. The MTA hopes this will not only keep their cars clean but also make them cleanable again. This could well be the first effective measure against GRAFFITI art. The coming years will show whether the "writers," who have managed to survive for almost two decades, will surmount this obstacle, too.




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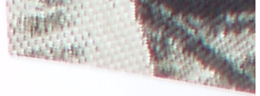





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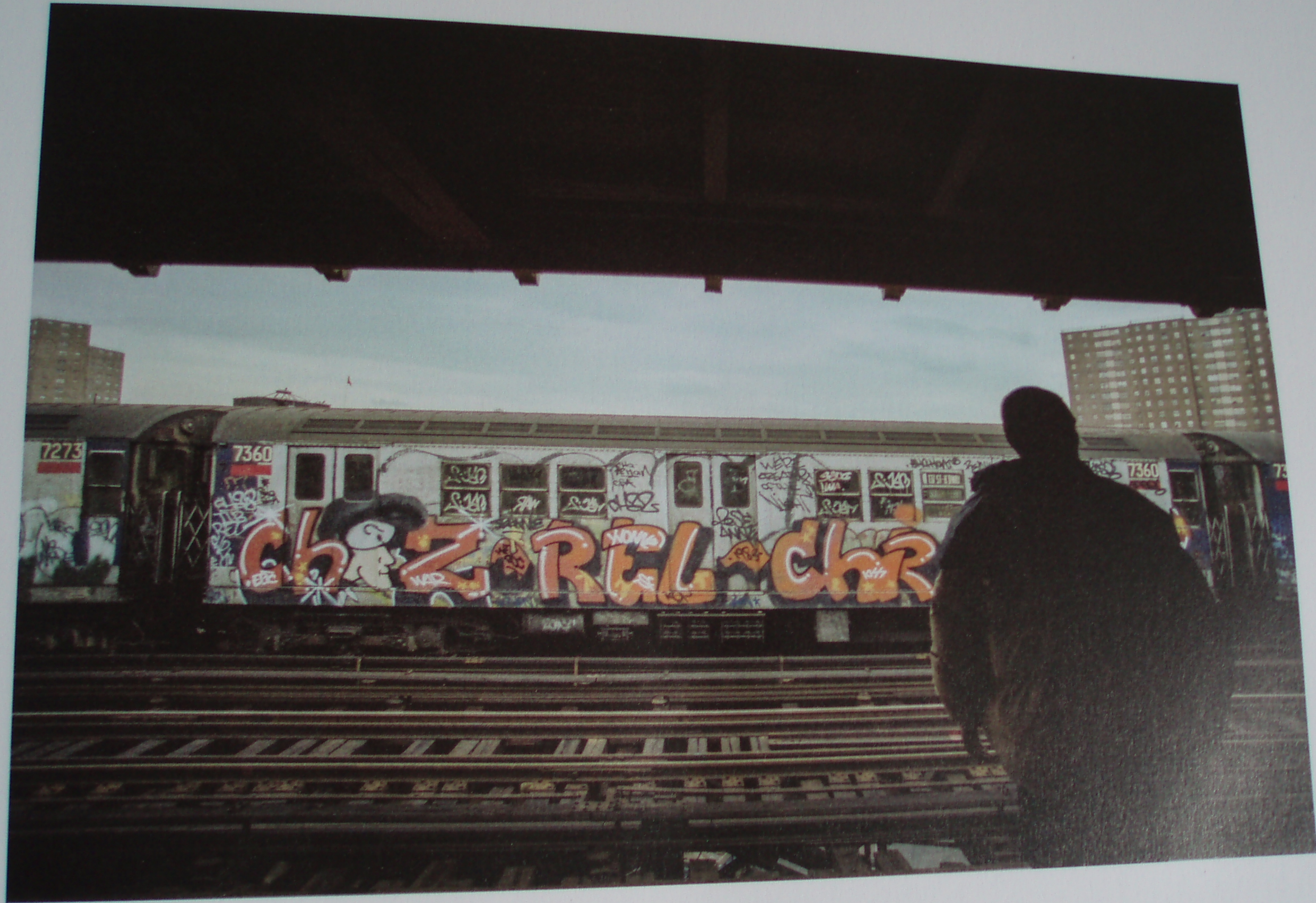



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Please keep han
Captain Morgan Spiced Rum!


Captain Morgan Spiced Rum!
"Yo soy testigo. Con Eastern, además de un asiento a un gran precio, usted recibe toda una línea aérea."
EASTERN
Emergency Evacuation Procedure
Please keep hands
off the door.
LUXURY


LUXURY
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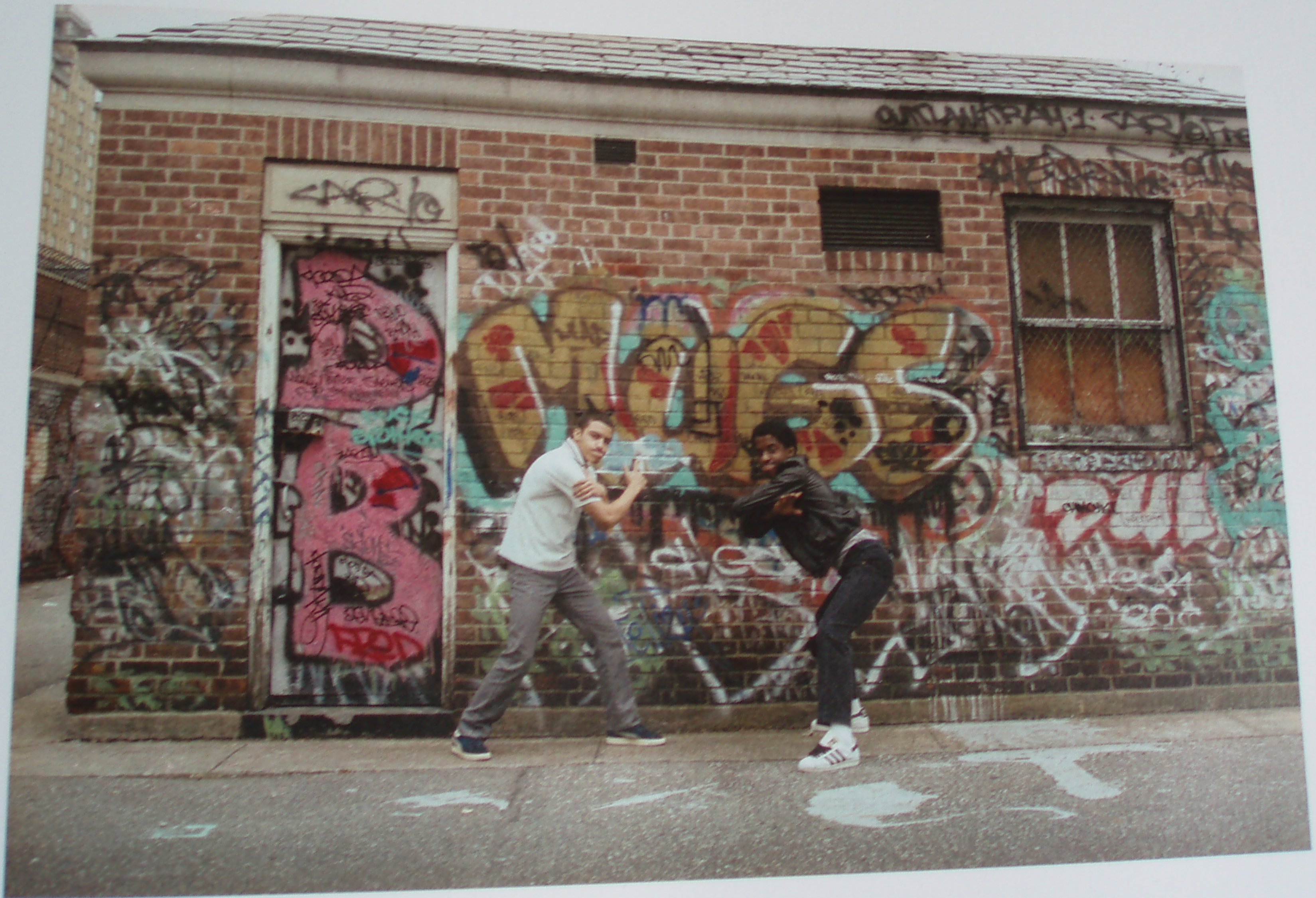

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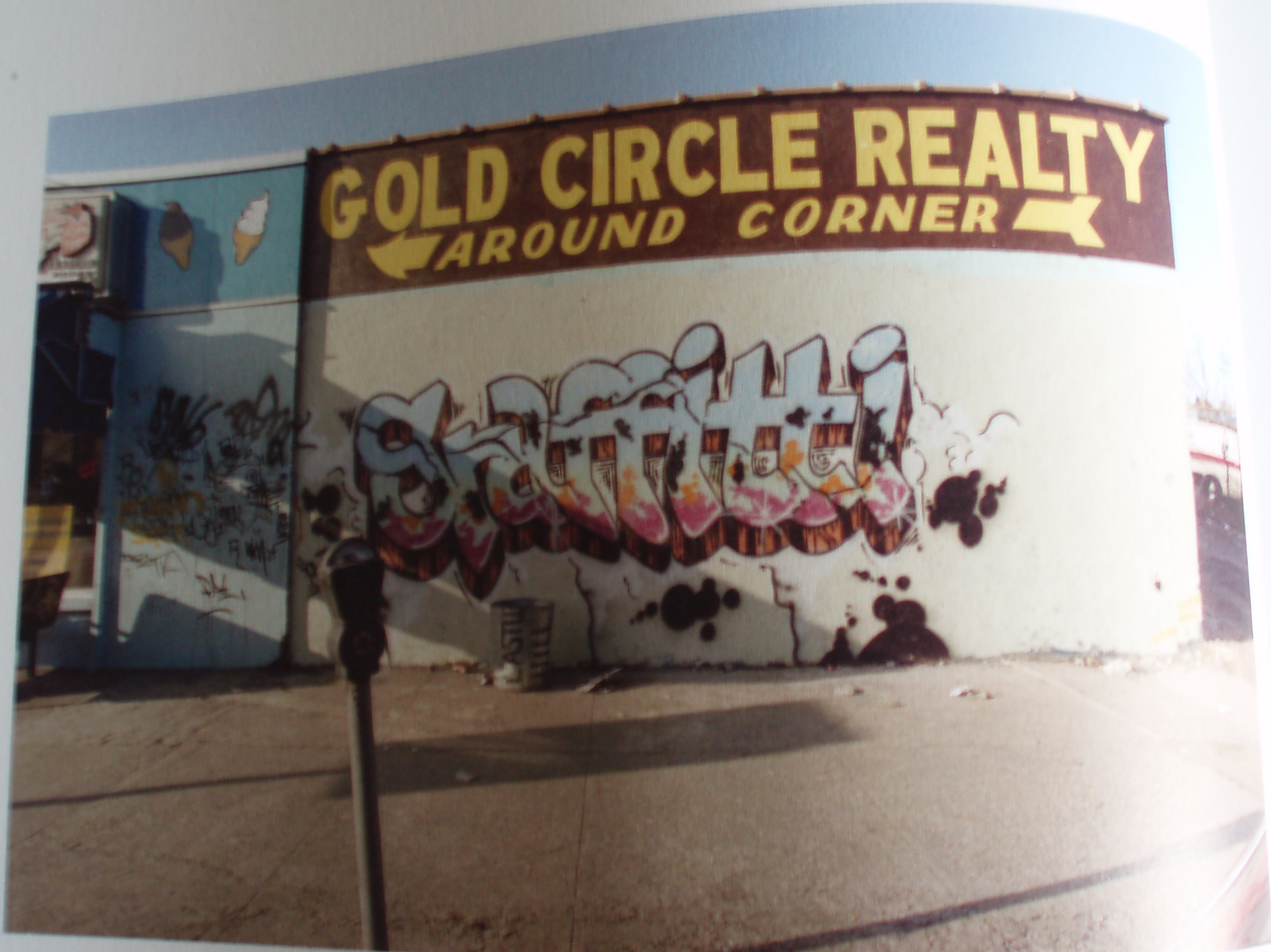

I LOVE NEW YORK


Winston



In the Bronx, GRAFFITI art has also become a legal business: shop owners order decorations for their walls and doors from young sprayers, who get a few hundred dollars for one of their works. From a technical point of view, these are still convincing, but they lack expression and vigor, in short: art. Stiffness and mediocrity dominate – the original opulence has been forced to submit to the legibility of the company's name.


Take a taste of the finest.
SMIRNOFF
VODKA
CANDY BAR
SODAS, CANDY, VIDEO & GAMES & MORE


GOLD CIRCLE REALTY
AROUND CORNER


SKYS THE LIMIT
SKYS THE LIMIT
99
WISE


Newport




JVC
QUALITY AUDIO AND VIDEO
BEEFSTEAK & BREW
BURGERS TOO!
Calvin Klein Jeans
We Respond
RICOH
CAMERAS
SEIKO
QUARTZ
HOWARD JOHNSON'S
EASTWEST
AMITYVILLE II

Expressive, individual pictographs or “writings”: that’s GRAFFITI. It thrives and depends on the continual design of new letter forms and shapes. The results can be compared – and easily confused – with abstract art. Again and again, we seem to recognize familiar elements – only to find that we have been drawn in by a riddle: waiting once more for a solution. The more we fail, the better we learn to appreciate these works of art: GRAFFITI, hieroglyphs of our time.


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COMPUTERIZED COLOR PRINTS
GUARANTEED
SHARPER · BRIGHTER · CLEARER


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Utica Avenue
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BREEZER



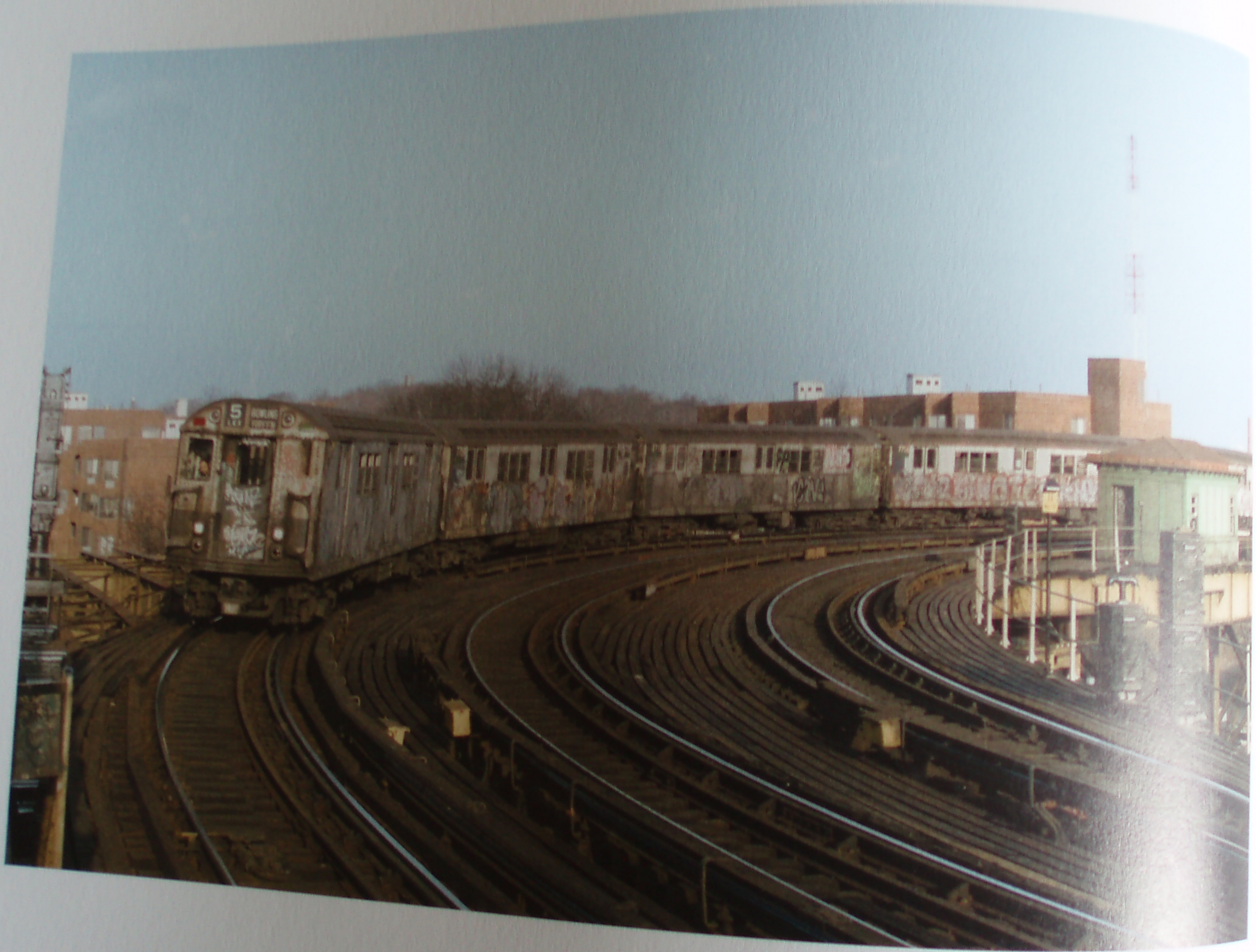

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WILD STYLE

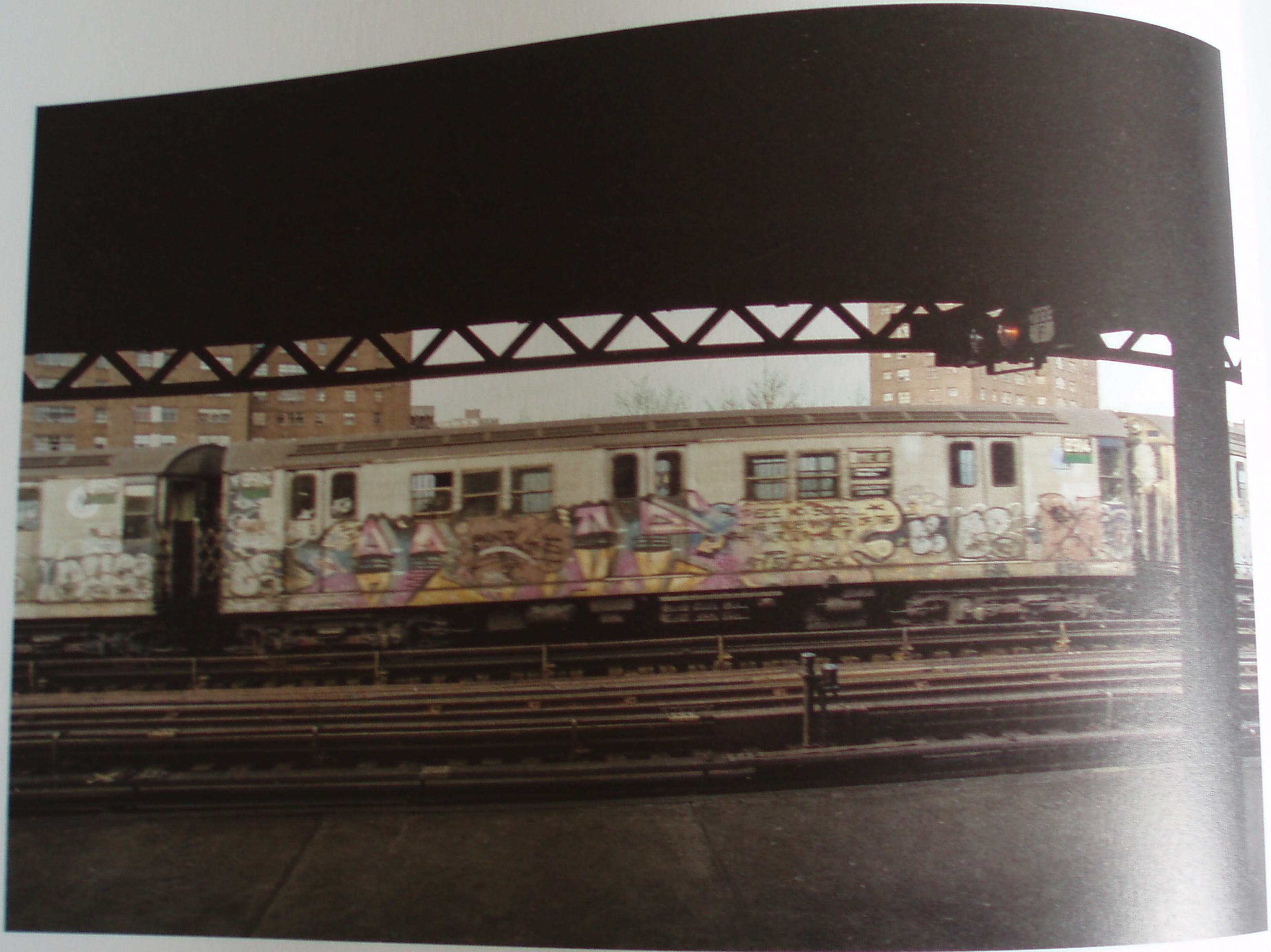



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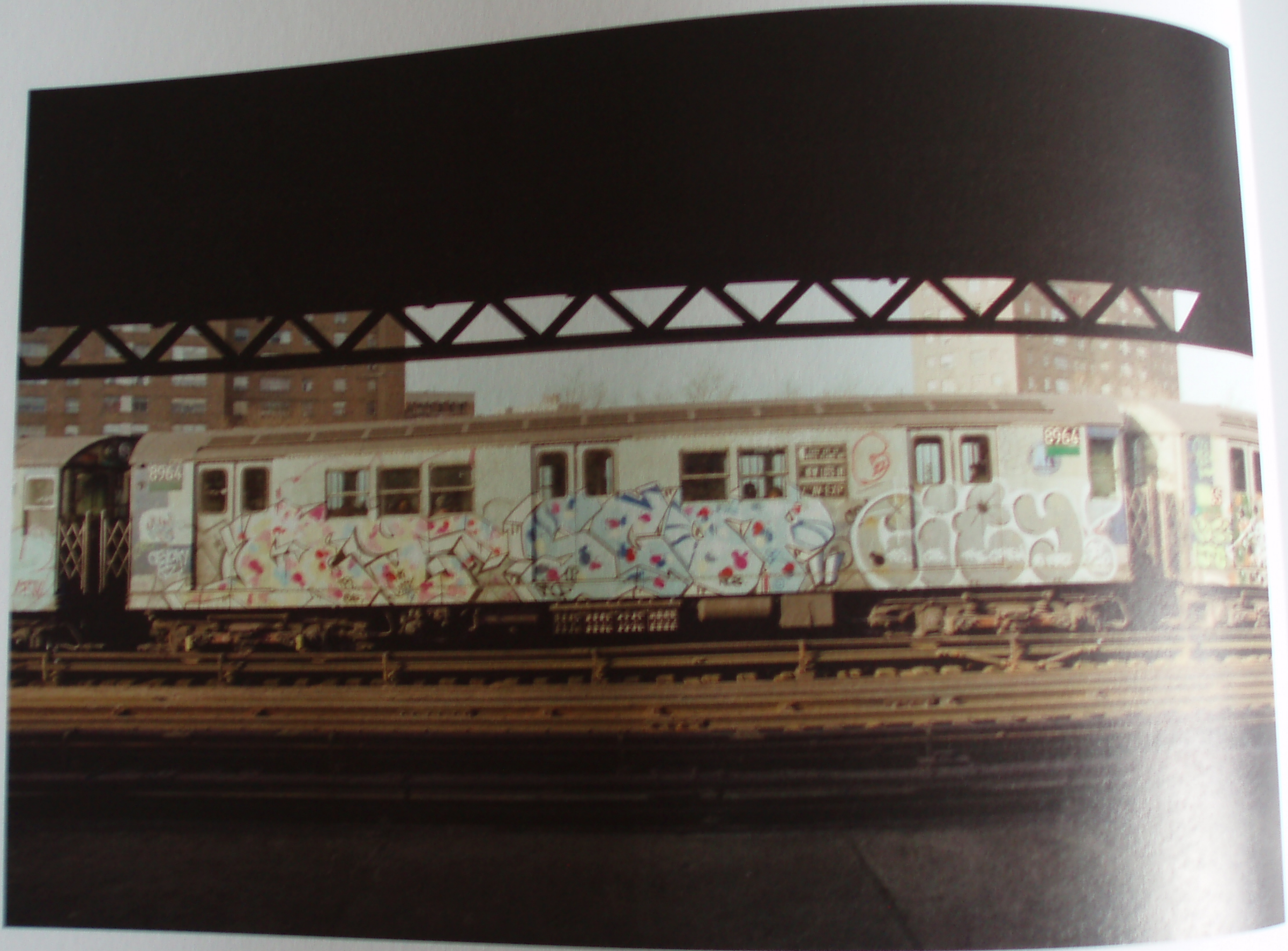




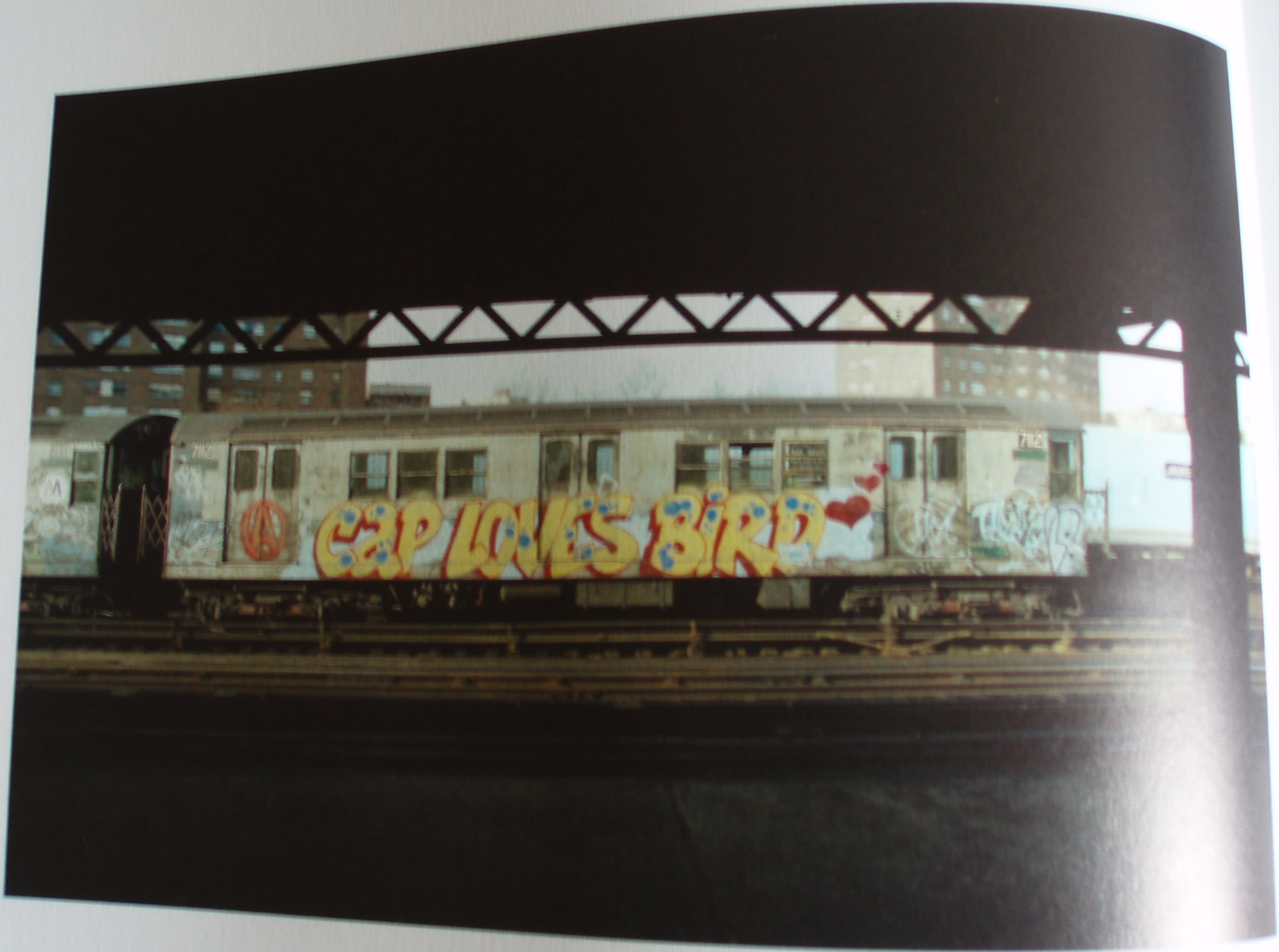

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SEAMANS FURNITURE
FACTORY SHOWROOM
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC


SEAMANS FURNITURE
FACTORY SHOWROOM
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DA-DA SOUP
POP SOUP
T.V. PARTY SOUP



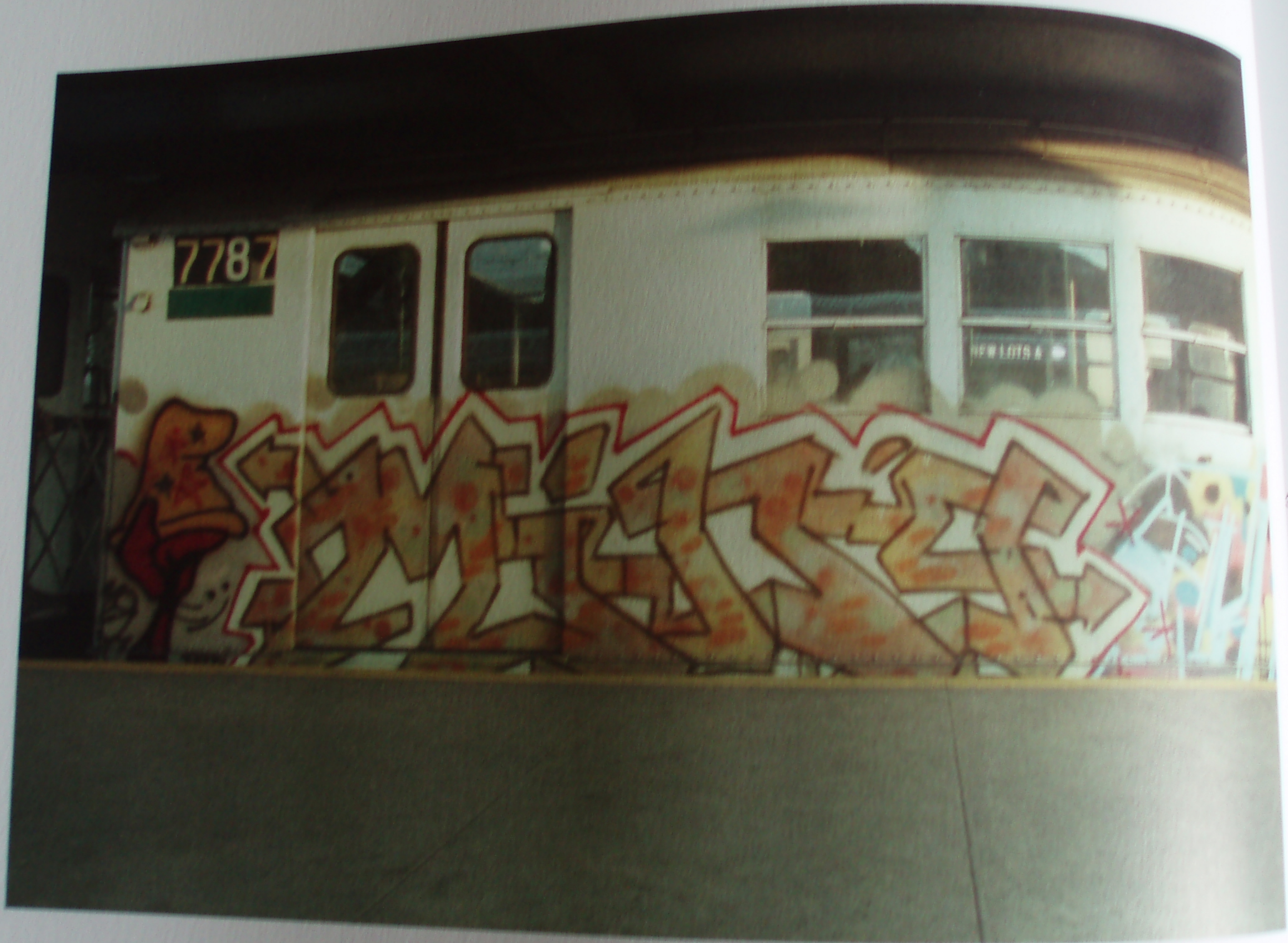





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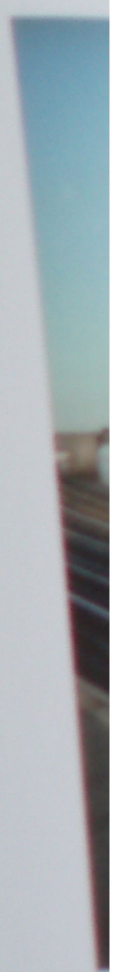







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"ALL PERSONS"




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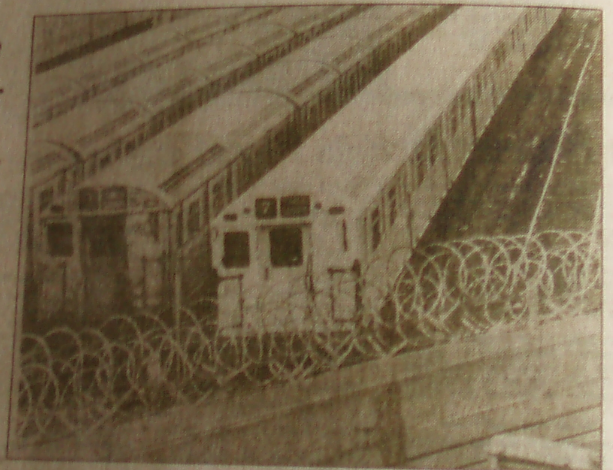
The New York Times
Metropolitan Report

FRIDAY, APRIL 8, 1983



The New York Times/Carl T. Gossett and Neal Boenzi

Graffiti marring the white paint of an IRT No. 5 train that had been painted with a graffiti-resistant compound. Below: Trains in the heavily guarded subway yard in Corona, Queens.



City Is Losing Another Battle In Graffiti War

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

New York City's freshly painted white subway cars are quickly turning all shades of red, green, blue and black.

Graffiti scrawlers have struck the white cars to such an extent that Transit Authority officials are now considering halting the creation of what they once envisioned as "a great white fleet."

To date, about 25 percent of the system's 6,900 cars have been painted with a graffiti-resistant white compound. The cost has been $2,200 a car.

"When I first saw the white cars, I said, 'Give them time, give them time,'" said Leo Palkovich of Manhattan as his orange-splattered white train pulled into the Grand Central station. "Well, their time has come."

The program began nearly two years ago. Officials said they hoped to demonstrate that they had "regained control over the system" with the painting program, coupled with new fences around subway yards, German shepherd attack dogs and barbed wire.

But Scrawlers Stay in Control

Once they stopped graffiti on the outside of the subway cars, the officials reasoned, getting the interiors clean would be easy.

A subway trip to Brooklyn yesterday, however, showed that the scrawlers still held the upper hand, both inside and outside. "Zesta!" and "J Rock" and "Smash" were splashed over the outside of white subway cars seen on the IRT Nos. 2 and 5 lines. The exteriors of the cars on two other lines were still white: the No. 6 in Manhattan and the No. 7 in Queens.

John D. Simpson, the president of the Transit Authority, said that the cleanliness of the cars depended largely on where they were stored. Those on the No. 7 line, for example, are in the fenced-in yard in Corona, near Shea Stadium.

As part of a $20 million program, all the authority's 19 subway yards have been given new fences. They are topped with razor-ribbon — the latest in barbed-wire technology — and in Corona, German shepherds patrol behind them.

The program concentrated on the storage facilities because that is where most of the graffiti vandalism has occurred. But some yards do not have room for all the cars assigned there.

"The ones that get hit are the ones that are laid up on the main line," Mr. Simpson said. There are no fences around these public tracks and it is there that the scrawlers do their damage, he added.

In addition, he said, many cars are defaced while in service. But only certain maintenance facilities — Corona and Phelam, among them — have adequate washing facilities.

The white paint that is used is a polyurethane-based compound that resists the scrawls left by Magic Markers and spray cans. The graffiti can only be removed, however, if the washing facilities are available.

Mr. Simpson said that 1,400 cars had been painted thus far. About 500 of them are vulnerable to graffiti, he said, because they are not getting the protection and cleaning they need.

"I've been discussing whether we should proceed with the program or whether we should pause and focus on the lines already painted," Mr. Simpson said.

However, one subway rider, Tami Johnson of Brooklyn, thought that the authority should forget the whole thing. "I'm riding on the inside," she said, "I couldn't care less about how the outsides are painted.

"Now, if they could only do something about the delays."






TAT
MACK


7613
VANDAL IN KRIME


NEW LOTS AV
THOMAS ..C.. LIVE




EAST 241 ST
WHITE PLAINS RD
NEW LOTS AV
7613
NEW YORK CITY
CYC
THOMAS..C..LIVE FROM THE

Urban Graffiti – New York/Basel 82/83

Urban Graffiti – Haring & Hambleton

If these writings are only being brought together now instead of three years ago, this is partially due to the regrettable fact that graffiti art is not creating much artistically innovative work anymore. Even the many colorful pictograms that have recently added their forms to rail and highway structures all over Europe are formally and chromatically strictly based on the sprayed images of New York's subways, but these also passed their prime years ago.

Even at first glance, urban graffiti – as it is understood here – is distinguished from the art of Manhattan's subway graffiti through its individuality and its intellectuality. This also applies to Europe's sprayers to the extent that their works have left the realm of pubescent self-assertion.

The art world generally considers Keith Haring and Richard Hambleton to be part of New York's graffiti scene; however, their intellectual origins as well as the social preconditions of their public presence demand that a clear distinction be made.

"Subway graffiti" manifests itself as a battle for survival fought out in color among rival groups in the outer boroughs of New York. Their preferred medium is – or was – the subway cars of New York City. The works they create primarily serve the self-representation of socially disadvantaged classes; they are frequently also testaments to a test of courage in color – their creators are typically minors.

In recent years, subway graffiti paintings have also appeared in many large Western European cities; although they have left behind their original New York medium, they are scarcely distinguishable from their American prototypes in terms of formal composition and the way in which they are created. Here, it is once again their archaic and unintellectual idiom that makes them compelling.

By contrast, "urban graffiti" presents itself as a richly varied, individual, and simultaneously anonymous form of articulation, which can now be found in some of the West's major cities. It always emerges out of the artistic or political reflections of an individual creator. The "Zurich sprayer" Harald Naegeli's works from the late 1970s provide a typical example of this. The walls and billboards of our urban environment form the typical medium.

Understood in this way, works of "urban graffiti" should not usually be seen as a form of self-representation. And, in contrast to "subway graffiti," they are not addressed to an insider audience often composed of rivals – instead, they are deliberately directed towards a broader public. This is especially true of the works by Haring and Hambleton gathered together here.


77
77TH STREET
LENOX HILL HOSPITAL

Keith Haring

The most astounding thing about Keith Haring's biography is his undisputed simultaneous success as a painter of urban graffiti and as an internationally recognized artist. In 1982, while I was beginning to capture Haring's chalk drawings in New York's subway stations, I met him for the first time at the Whitney Museum as he was filling an entire wall of the museum with his unmistakable pictographic idiom. He seemed rather shy and selfless, but simultaneously agile and straightforward. He greatly admired the New York subway sprayers; however, it was not his intention to adopt or further develop their style.

"I arrived in New York at a time when the most beautiful paintings being shown in the city were on wheels – on trains – paintings that traveled to you instead of vice versa. I was immediately attracted to the subway graffiti on several levels: the obvious mastery of drawing and color, the scale, the pop imagery, the commitment to drawing worthy of risk, and the direct relationship between artist and audience. I had no intention, however, of jumping on the bandwagon and imitating their style."


23
23
23
The U.S.A. in an entirely different way.
USA TODAY
THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER
T.V. USA 83
83
TV
TV

Keith Haring was born in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, on May 4, 1958. During his first years of school, he was already drawing Mickey Mouse characters with casual ease and delighting his classmates by sketching comic-strip series. He also successfully played the role of caricaturist in high school.

At sixteen, he moved to Pittsburgh, where he was highly dedicated in devoting his attention to the various forms of modern art. During this period, he was particularly fascinated by Pierre Alechinsky's drawings, which he was able to see at a retrospective presented by the Carnegie Institute in 1977.

In 1978 Haring had his first exhibition at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. However, the cultural magnet of America's art metropolis would also exert its pull on Haring: he moved to New York at the age of twenty and enrolled at the School of Visual Arts.

He began studying semiotics, and this may have been significant in the development of his symbolic idiom, which so readily etches itself in his viewers' memories. However, the many impressions of an urban and social nature that confronted Haring in New York would be far more important – and subway graffiti was at the forefront of these.


143
TV
143

In 1980 he had his first exhibition in New York at Club 57 on the Lower East Side, which was a well-known gathering place for young artists at that time. One year later, Haring began creating his works in New York's subway stations. The pictures gathered together in this little volume are limited to this period of his work. In spite of his persistent admiration for the graffiti of New York, there was never any cooperation on site during this period; the nocturnal raid on a subway car ultimately seemed too risky to him. Haring was nonetheless a familiar figure in the subway graffiti scene, and it was also important to him to gain the recognition of well-known writers. The collective works he created in 1982 with LA2 (Little Angel 2), who was then a 15-year-old graffiti writer, remained exceptions, and this action is to be assessed purely as an affirmation of sympathy. The subway cars were not a part of his medium either; instead, he used the stations' empty billboard panels, which were covered with a layer of matte black paper, and he chose to work with white chalk instead of cans of indelible spray paint.

Parallel to this thoroughly productive phase of "subversive" public-relations work, Haring was creating works in his studio that would soon also reach those who may have never ridden New York's subways.


83
The Return of the Great Adventure.
RAIDERS
of the LOST ARK

In 1982 a veritable Haring euphoria broke out in New York, opening the doors of museums and galleries to the artist – in almost no time, he became an American art star. Exhibitions in New York, Washington DC, Rotterdam, London, and Tokyo followed, and he was among the protagonists of young American painting presented at the Documenta in Kassel and at the Art Basel in the ensuing years. His presence in the subway stations did diminish during those years but, in terms of his inner attitude, he nonetheless remained attached to the graffiti medium and, thus, to working for a broad audience: "I have been drawing in the subway for three years now, and although my career aboveground has skyrocketed, the subway is still my favorite place to draw. There is something very 'real' about the subway system and the people who travel in it; perhaps there is no other place in the world where people of such diverse appearance, background, and life-style have intermingled for a common purpose. In this underground environment, one can often feel a sense of oppression and struggle in the vast assortment of faces. It is in this context that an expression of hope and beauty carries the greatest rewards."



Haring developed or invented a pictographic language in his works whose form of communication is to be placed in a realm somewhere between comic narrative and a simplified symbolic language. Thus, for example, an angular wolf's head in profile seems to perhaps represent a code for power or the abuse of power, and a little dog barks for an opposing minority. And almost everywhere, like a personal signet, we find a radiant or "radioactive" baby: Haring's symbol for the helpless individual. Sometimes the messages he shares are unequivocal, such as his fear of a nuclear catastrophe. Other times they are transcendental and surreal – when rods become energized or dogs jump through people. However, they are always disarming and force us to engage in reflection.

In terms of their graphic composition, every detail of drawing is renounced. The scenes' two-dimensionality is maintained without exception, and their vitality stems solely from line, which is simultaneously an ornament and conveys meaning. It is not surprising that Haring also turned to abstract two-dimensional compositions.


BRIDGE
LEXINGTON AV
LOCAL
92
TV


TV



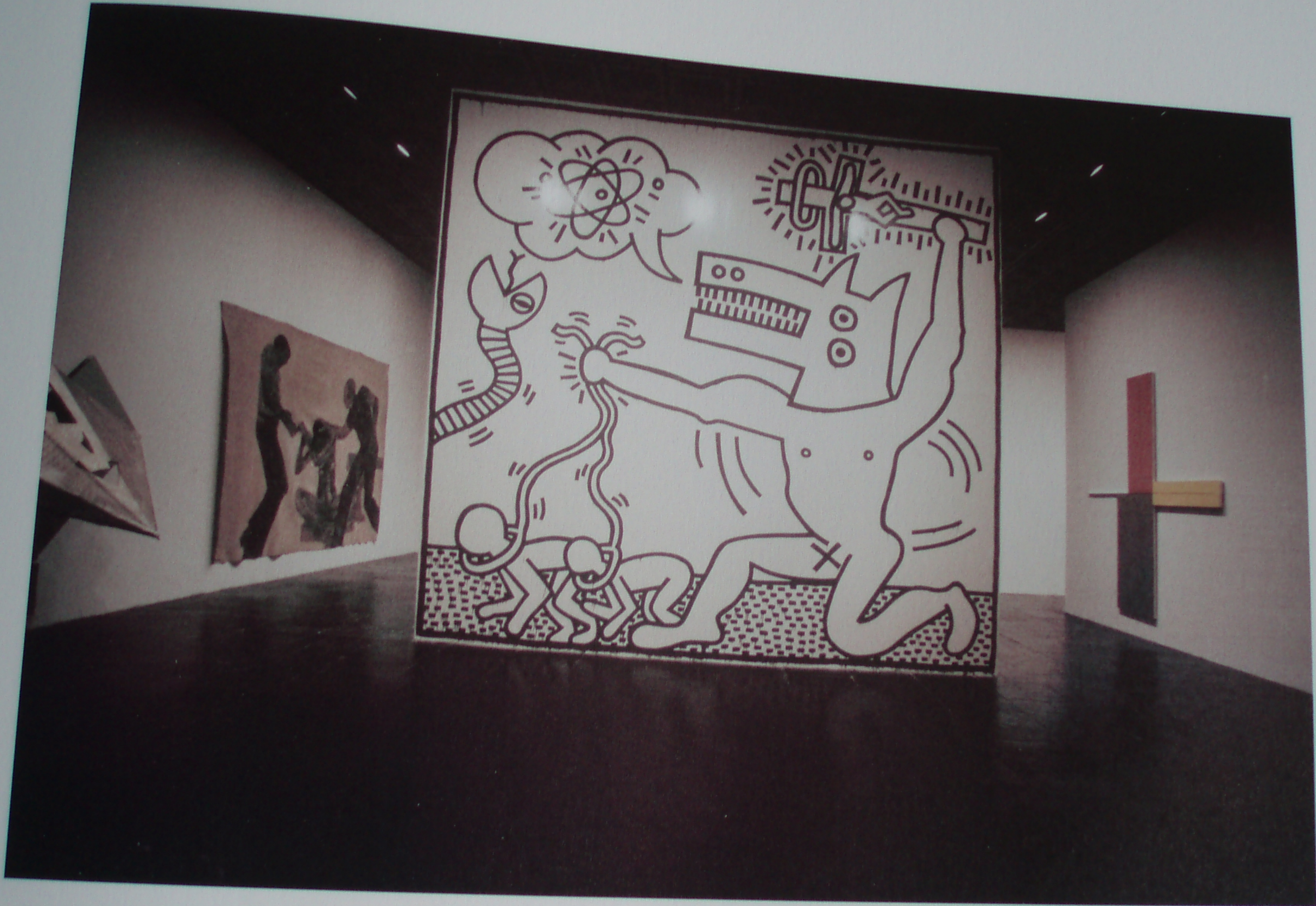
Haring's rich visual idiom is anything but intimate; at least in its formal composition, it appears cool and objective and seems to be there for everyone. However, it was precisely this universal intelligibility, this ability to encapsulate complex societal issues within a simple visual idiom, that formed the foundation of Haring's popular success. His stylized creatures invite us to identify with them; the helpless baby or the barking little dog could already be purchased in the form of pins at his first exhibition in New York. The next step of opening Keith Haring shops in New York and perhaps soon in Tokyo as well seemed almost inescapable. Haring thus officially and commercially made his personal mode of articulating himself available to the public. The opening of Haring shops like these must thus be understood in terms of a logical continuation of his popular body of work.



TV
THE NEW YORK
KNICKS
...The City's Game!
madison square garden


TV



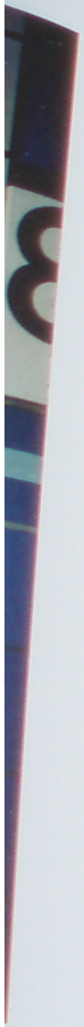



THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
DONNELL BRANCH
20 W. 53RD ST.
Smirnoff
THE QUALITY ALWAYS COMES THROUGH.
T.V.




ONE MEAN BEAN.
Jack Rabbit
Brand
TV

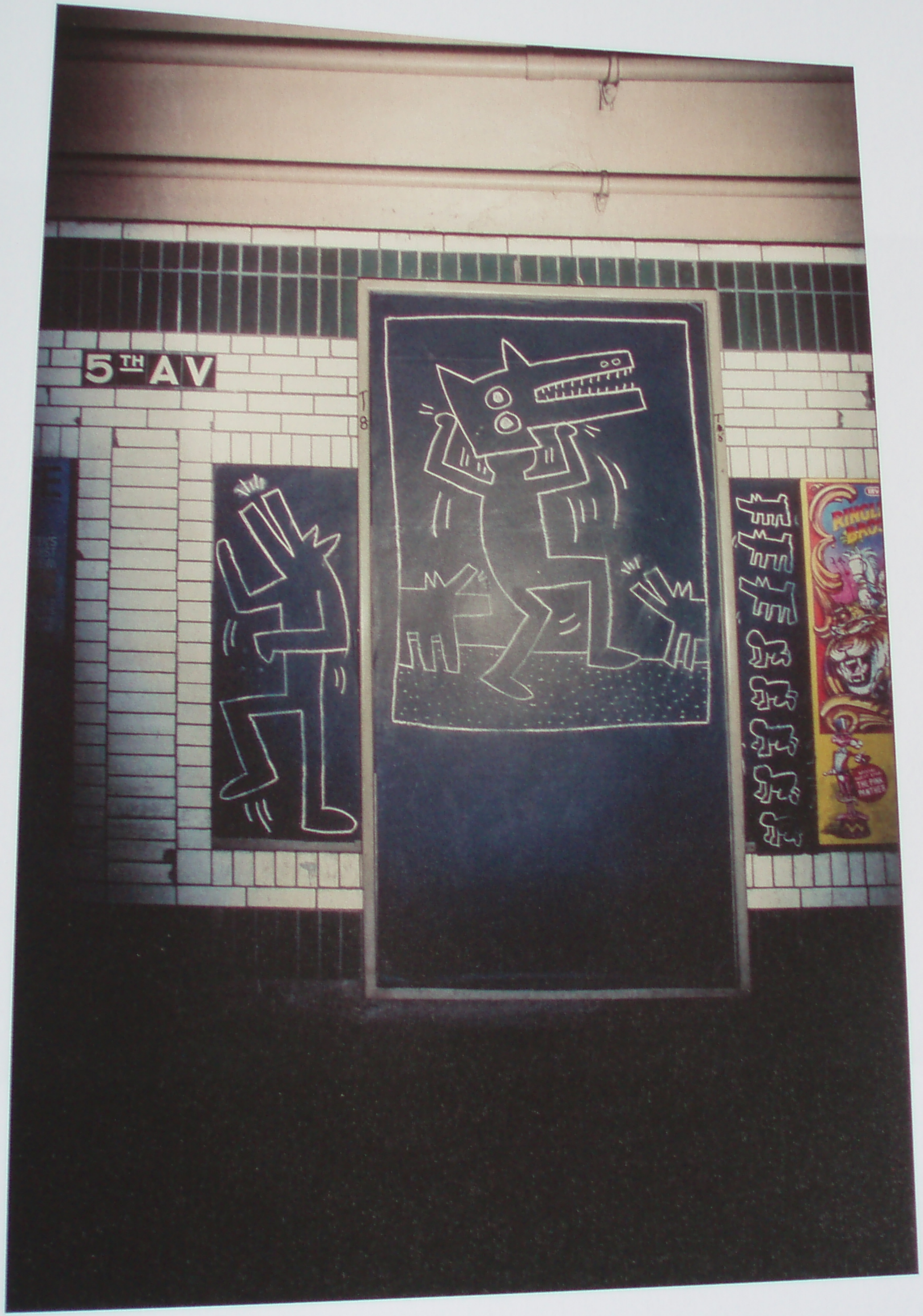





HAPPY VALENTINE
1983
55th & M




5TH AV

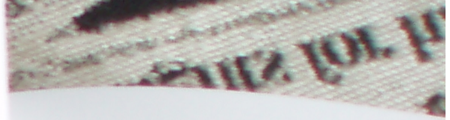

5TH AV








83
FURNISH YOUR SHELTER FOR LESS.
THE W&J SLOANE CLEARANCE CENTER




Get
a million
dollars worth
of business
advice,
FREE!
IMPROVING
THE
BUSES
OPENS
Tue.
MAR. 29
OMNI
ON SALE EVERYWHERE




TIMERIDER
PENTHOUSE


IRVIN FELD & KENNETH FELD
RINGLING BROS.
BARNUM & BAILEY
CIRCUS
THE PINK PANTHER
OPENS
Tue.
MAR. 29
madison square garden




More fun than games!
TV
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A Greydon Clark Production
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BRINGS JOY TO A THEATER NEAR YOU MARCH 11.


SICKNESS


The Return of the Great Adventure.
RAIDERS
of the LOST ARK

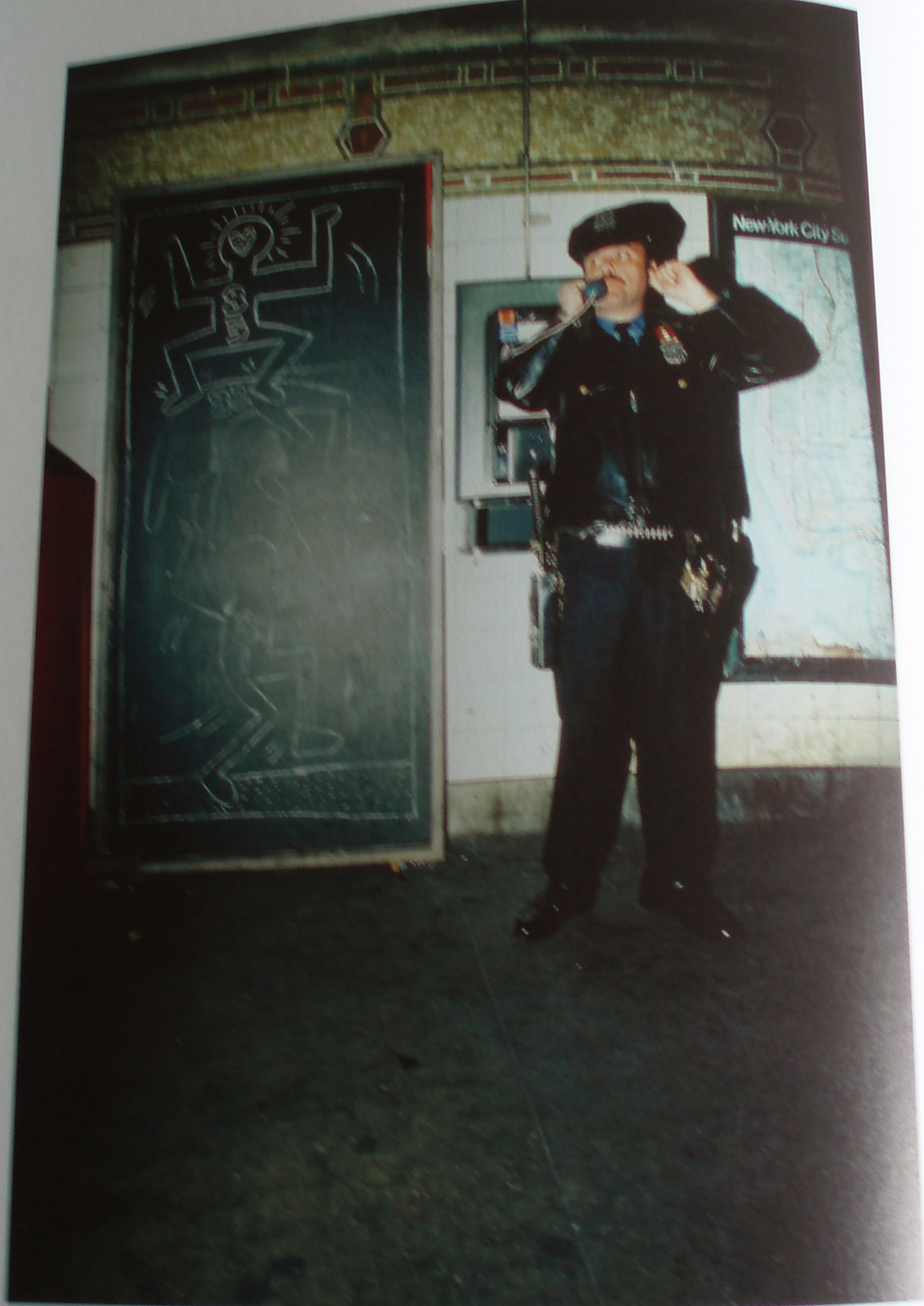


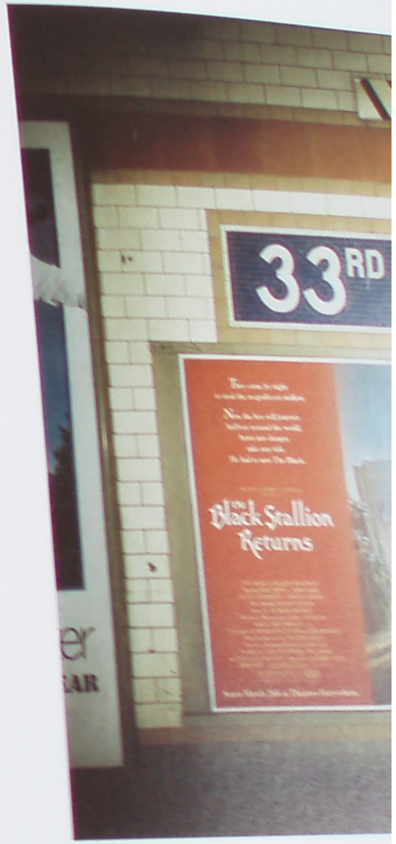

TV


THERE'S ONLY ONE
NEWS FOR NEW YORK,
AND THAT'S
NEWS 4 NEW YORK
THE ONLY NEWS 4 NEW YORK

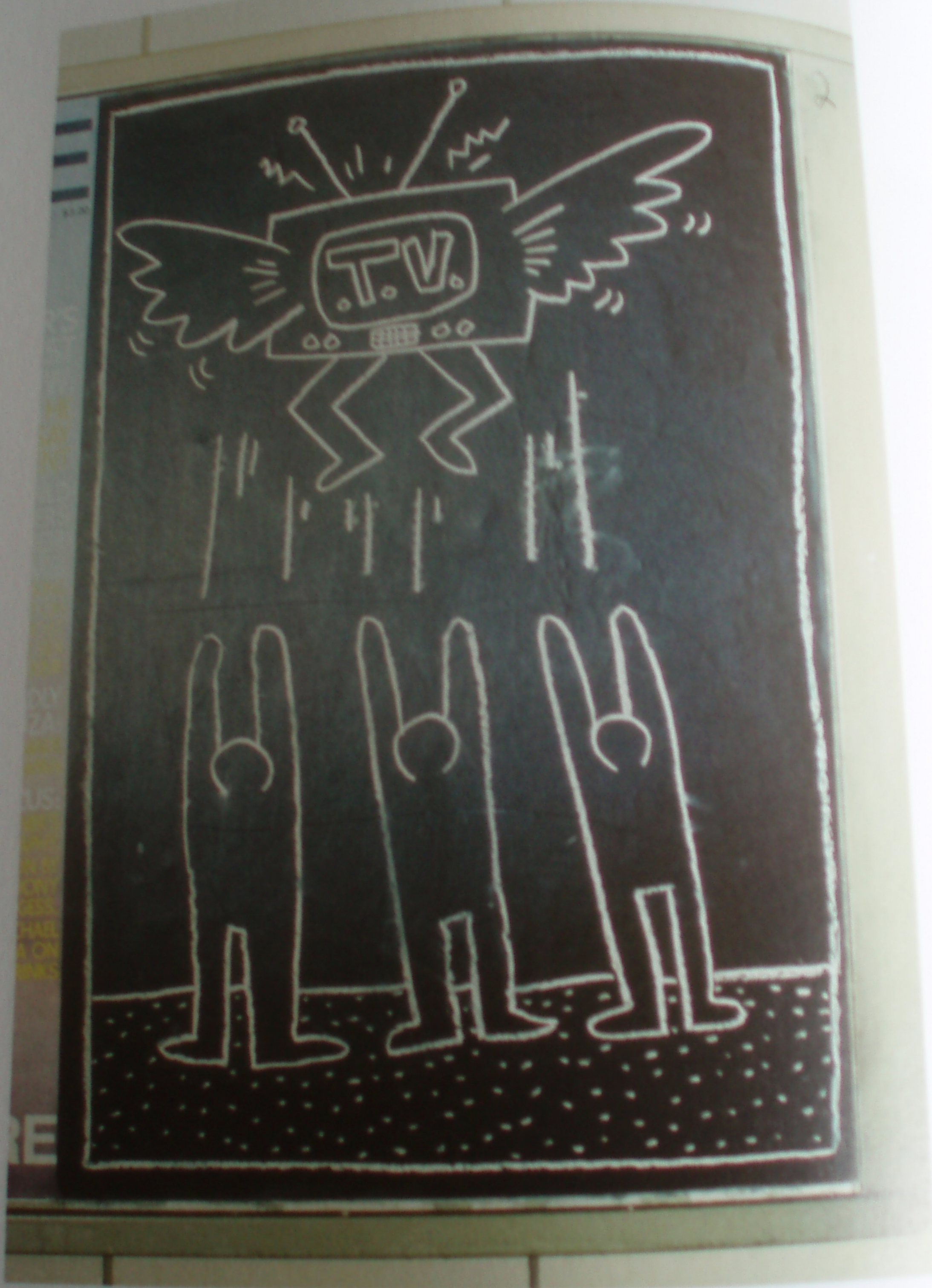



23
1983


New-York City


33RD
Black Stallion
Returns


33RD ST
33
They came by night
to steal the magnificent stallion.
Now, the boy will journey
halfway around the world,
brave any danger,
take any risk.
He had to save The Black.
The Black Stallion Returns
Starts March 25th at Theatres Everywhere.
TV
TV


T.V.




NEW BETTY
TEHCHING HSIEH
ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE 1981-1982
the
IIOYD MC NEILL
Afro-Brazilian Jazz Sextet
111 HUDSON




331
331




SEE THE
WILDLIFE
FRANK MAYA
Freedom & Dreams GLORIA & STEVE TROPP
ARLEEN SCHLOSS & BILLY BELL
PAUL ST. CLAIRE
Geek Art JOHN LIEBERMAN
NANCY HALL
Mouth Harp HUGH LEVICK
Preacher BILL ARNETH
THE DYNAMIC ROCKERS
(The Masters of Breakers)
SOUND WORKSHOP
Aug. 18
Cachina & Elisabeth
TEEN NITE
Music THE END
Art TEEN GRAFFITTI
Film RICHARD SANCA
Performance JIM NEV & JOHN NESCI
Wama Meets Kincaid NANCY FICHMAN & STEVE BUSCEMA
Performance KIRA-LEURA FERRAD
Slide Show NICK BERGERY
JOE VINE
Beat that someone special
ARMAGEDDON
113 JANE ST.
3 blks. below 14th
$4

Richard Hambleton

Richard Hambleton's artistic career is also characterized by a division into parallel channels of profitless urban graffiti and socially acceptable fine art. Although his fame is clearly based on his selected urban works – the shadow figures of Manhattan – he personally distanced himself from New York's graffiti scene. "I've never considered myself as a graffiti artist, graffiti as an esthetic I have never been interested in."

In contrast to Haring, Hambleton seems rather egocentric in his interviews and conveys little sense of modesty. His statements are accompanied by an air of reclusiveness and narcissism. While Haring enjoyed the spontaneous comments of his subway audience, Hambleton was touchy in his reactions to public criticism. "There is a lot of naive criticism of me and my work. Maybe it's time I had a book published ... it might be titled 'Richard Hambleton's Street and Studio Works, 1974–1984.'"


LOVE YOUR BROTHER
DRUNK DRIVING DOOM

Richard Hambleton was born in Los Angeles in 1954 and studied at the San Francisco Art Institute. At 22, he had his first solo show at the Pumps Centre for the Arts in Vancouver. This was followed by further exhibitions in Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco, and – in 1981 – New York. Like Haring, Hambleton also frequented Club 57 in Manhattan and his work was included in group exhibitions there in 1981 and 1982. Hambleton began his "urban works" in 1975: in one form or another, they all share the theme of the city dweller's anxieties. Two projects will be mentioned here. From 1976 to 1978, under the title *Image Mass Murder*, he created white outlines of fictive murder victims lying on the ground in fifteen American and Canadian cities. Each was provided with a little red splash of blood and formed a kind of crime-scene documentation. Hambleton's response to the foreseeable reactions of dismayed passers-by was: "If you paint a murder scene on canvas, it just looks like a painting."

However, the nearly life-size, black shadow figures he created in New York in 1981 and 1982 under the title *Night Life* drew far more attention. With their thoroughly dynamic brushstroke, most of the figures make a highly expressive and compelling impression: as startling as they initially were when seen during night-time walks through Manhattan, they soon became familiar silhouettes at well-known corners. "They could represent watchmen or danger or the shadows of a human body after a nuclear holocaust or even my own shadow. But what makes them exciting is the power of the viewer's imagination. It's that split-second experience when you see the figure that matters."





Anyone who studies the figures more closely also experiences the fascination of their creative process: all of them were veritably flung onto the wall within seconds during nocturnal operations. The wild contours and splatters of paint, some of which may also have landed on the artist himself, cause the figures to freeze in mid-motion, so to speak. Hambleton created over 400 of these figures during his solitary walks through Manhattan. He also dressed entirely in black and armed himself with a six-inch brush and buckets full of house paint. "I feel mysterious when I paint them."

The accusation that *Urban Night Life* took on an obsessive dimension cannot simply be dismissed – particularly after the project's European sequel was carried out in 1984 under the title *Secret Mission*. That year, Hambleton travelled to Western Europe five times and left behind his wild shadows in twenty-one cities. "At that time I decided to travel to as many major cities as possible and paint black silhouettes ... It has become a sociological statement, crossing culture barriers. They imply many things ... they suggest many things. In Europe they are like contemporary saints. Western Europe can be thought of as one work of art."



Even in a text seeking to limit itself to his urban works, it would be unfair to Hambleton to not also mention his studio works, particularly since he has been spending the majority of his time in his New York studio in recent years. He actually only refers to his works on canvas as paintings. "I do not make paintings in the street, I paint pictures in the studio. I do not paint the picture outside – it exists. What I do outside is very simple – basic. I do not consider the city a blank canvas ... it is a motion picture with built-in psychological and sociological implications. It is the ability to understand the situation and work with it. The complete scenic picture not just the surface."

Thus, Hambleton responds in a striking form to a frightening urban setting – one that "official" murals sometimes idealize or seek to render harmless. Hambleton selected the most obvious urban subject matter for his works, people, and he did so not to distract us from the real scene ... the urban environment ... but to render the uncanny aspect of urbanization directly visible to us. "... the ready made picture ... It exists and can be added to. I am a visual artist – I add another visual element ... to this motion picture."










NEW
YORK
GRAFFITI


NEW YORK



Tagesthema. Seite 3

Graffiti in Basel: Die schwarzen Männer gehen um

Draussen steht er, schwarz, lebensgross, leicht gebückt an der Wand. Jemand hat ihn hingeschmiert, nächtlich, ungesehen und hastig.

An die Qualität heranzukommen, braucht die Fähigkeit, mehr noch die Freiheit, sich beeindrucken zu lassen. Das zumindest.

Als ich über der Brücke bin, kommen mir all diese Gedanken etwas gefährlich vor.

Tagsüber sind sie erkennbar tot und flach, etwas schwarze Mauer. Später werden sie Schatten, Schemen. Und werden lebendig.

Die schwarzen Männer gehen um wie der, der sie gemalt hat. Sie sind verstohlen und unheimlich wie der heimliche Pinsler. Sie suchen den Schatten und die Nacht, an ihnen haftet etwas Verbotenes.

Ecke ebenso wie in der gleissenden Vernissage und ist hier wie dort mit der gleichen Unsicherheit behaftet. An sie, die Qualität, heranzukommen, braucht die Fähigkeit, mehr noch die Freiheit, sich beeindrucken zu lassen. Das zumindest.

Kunst ist nie Recht, hat aber manchmal recht.

Als ich jenseits der Brücke wieder in die Gasse biege, steht er wieder da, schwarz an der Ecke, mannsgross, ein Schemen zwischen etwas Licht und viel Schatten; leicht gebückt wie vorher, aber etwas wilder: nächtlich, unbesehen, ein hastiger Pinselstrich und gleich wieder untergetaucht in der Dunkelheit. Hat er sich nicht eben etwas bewegt?

Morgen klar erkennbar: Tot und flach, etwas schwarze Mauer.

Schwarze Männer in der Theaterpassage ...

... an der Rittergasse.

... am Imbergässlein.

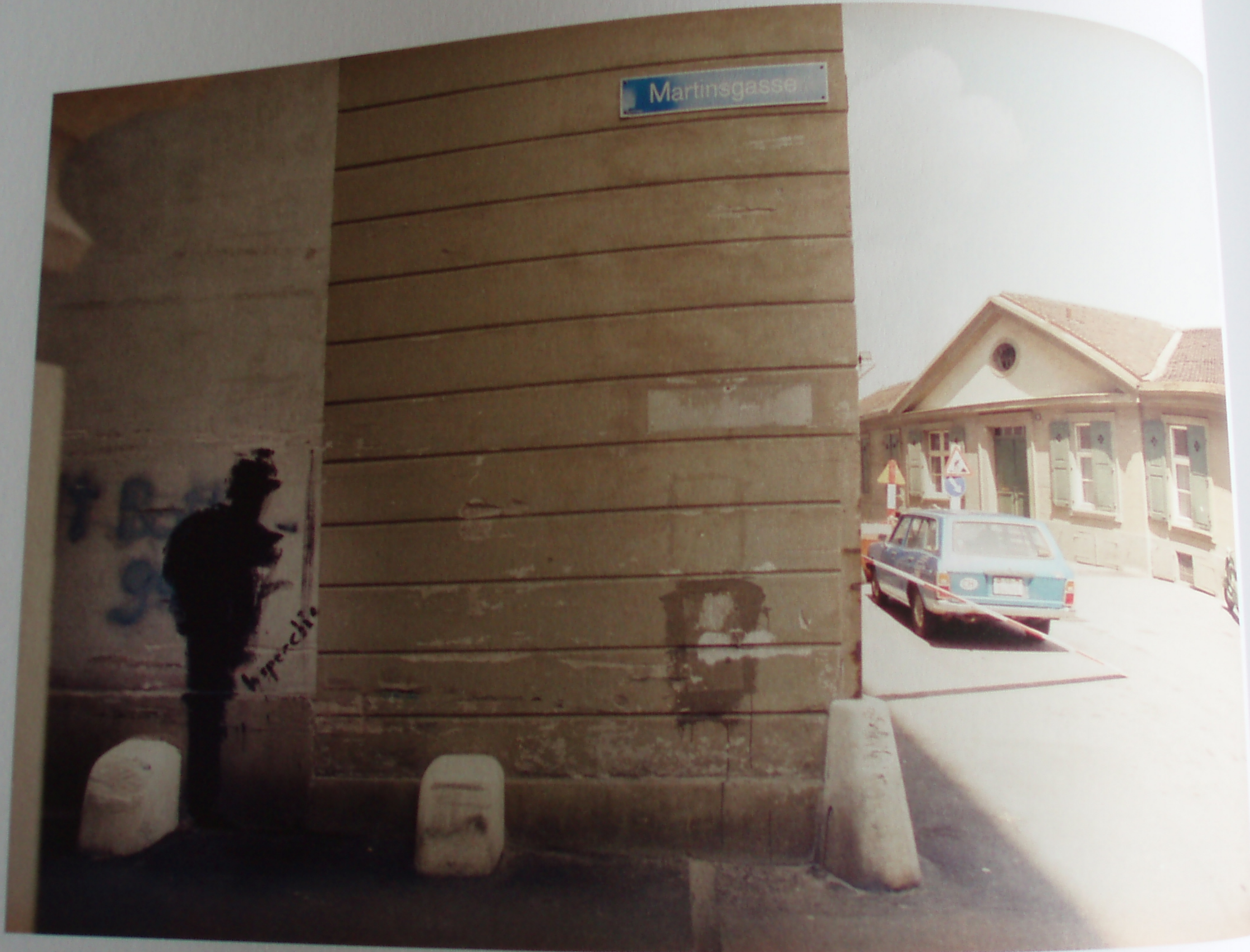
... an der Martinsgasse.

... und am Nadelberg.



295




Martinsgasse



297






Reverenzgässlein
RAUS
CH

Only in their expressive composition do Hambleton's studio paintings resemble the black silhouettes recorded here. They remain in an urban spectrum of themes only where advertising posters provide the thematic foundation of his dramatic language of color. Thus, for example, the tediously familiar Marlborough Country, complete with its cowboy and his horse, are submerged in apocalyptically dark sludge. "The advertisements present an entire mythic ideal – they are not just a logo, an abstract symbol. One could draw analogies to a 16th and 17th century madonna – the visual proponent of an ideal. It's not Madonna, it's Marlborough, Marlborough Country – a contemporary American myth."

Hambleton also loved to use life-size dimensions for his studio works. For example, he created a series of imposing landscapes and seascapes: some of these are over thirteen feet long and, in terms of gesture and power, they surpass even the wildest silhouette figures. At the same time, he did not hesitate to employ the simplest of techniques, adeptly painting the spraying foam of roaring breakers with sponges and buckets full of paint. For several years now, Hambleton seems to have turned away from the medium of urban graffiti and – in contrast to Haring – to have exclusively sought out the insider circles of the modern art scene.












TEXACO
OPEN 24 HOURS
00 P.M






Boston
Joey
Boo!
70


WARNING
NO
DUMPING


PLEASE
IN

309





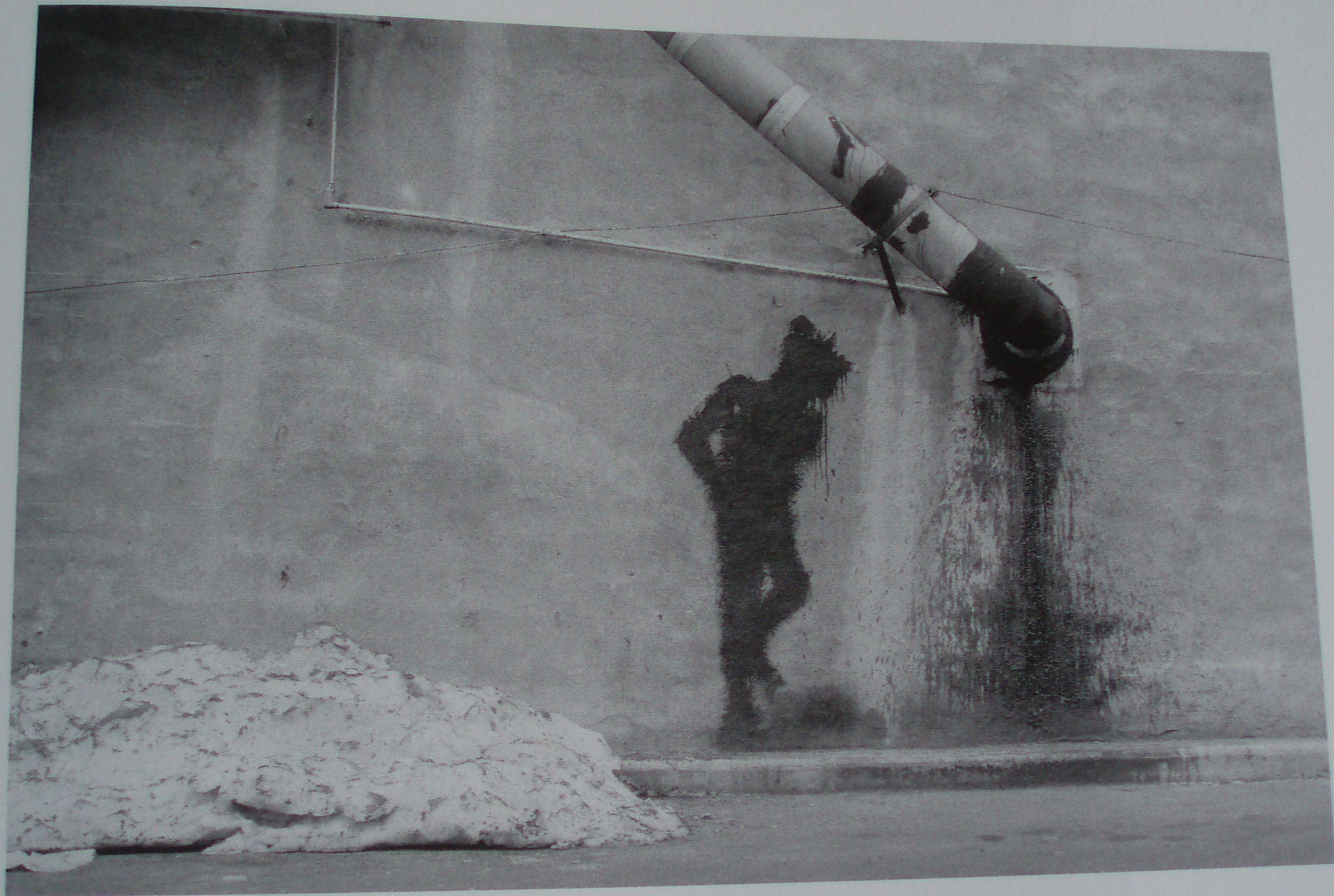



NOT RESPONSIBLE
FOR CARS LEFT
BEFORE or AFTER
POSTED HOURS
WARNING
DO NOT LOCK YOUR CAR WITHOUT
LEAVING YOUR KEYS WITH ATTENDANT.
IT WILL BE TOWED AWAY AT
YOUR EXPENSE.
AS OF SEPT.1,1980
ALL PRICES SUBJECT TO 14% C.S.T.
FF. MAY 1 198
WEST 14TH ST. GARAGE CORP.
222-228 West 14TH St.
Lic.No 368058 • Cap. 89 cars
Hours of Operation
Mon. to Fri. 8AM to 6PM
Sat. 8AM to 9PM
Sun. 8AM to 3PM (when attended)
DAY RATES
Monday to Thursday
Enter 8AM to 8PM
Up to 2 hours...3.07
Up to 3 hours...4.39
Max to close....4.39
Friday Only
Max to close....4.82
Saturday
Enter 8AM to
Flat rate......3.07
Monthly rate...100
14% NYC Parking tax extra


PARK ALL THE WAY IN
NEW RATES EFFECTIVE FEB 8 1982
DO NOT LOCK YOUR CAR-LEAVE IGNITION KEY
DAY RATES
Enter: 8AM to 6PM
MON, TUES, THURS, FRI 3.95
WED 6.14
SAT 5.27
14% NYC TAX EXTRA
AFTER 6PM NIGHT RATE ADDITIONAL
NIGHT RATES
Enter 6PM to MIDNIGHT
MON to THURS $5.27
FRI 6.14
SAT 7.89
14% N.Y.C. TAX EXTRA
AFTER 6 P.M.
DAY RATE NIGHT RATE
ADDITIONAL
THIS LOT CLOSES AT MIDNIGHT
DO NOT LOCK YOUR CAR
MUST LEAVE THE IGNITION KEY















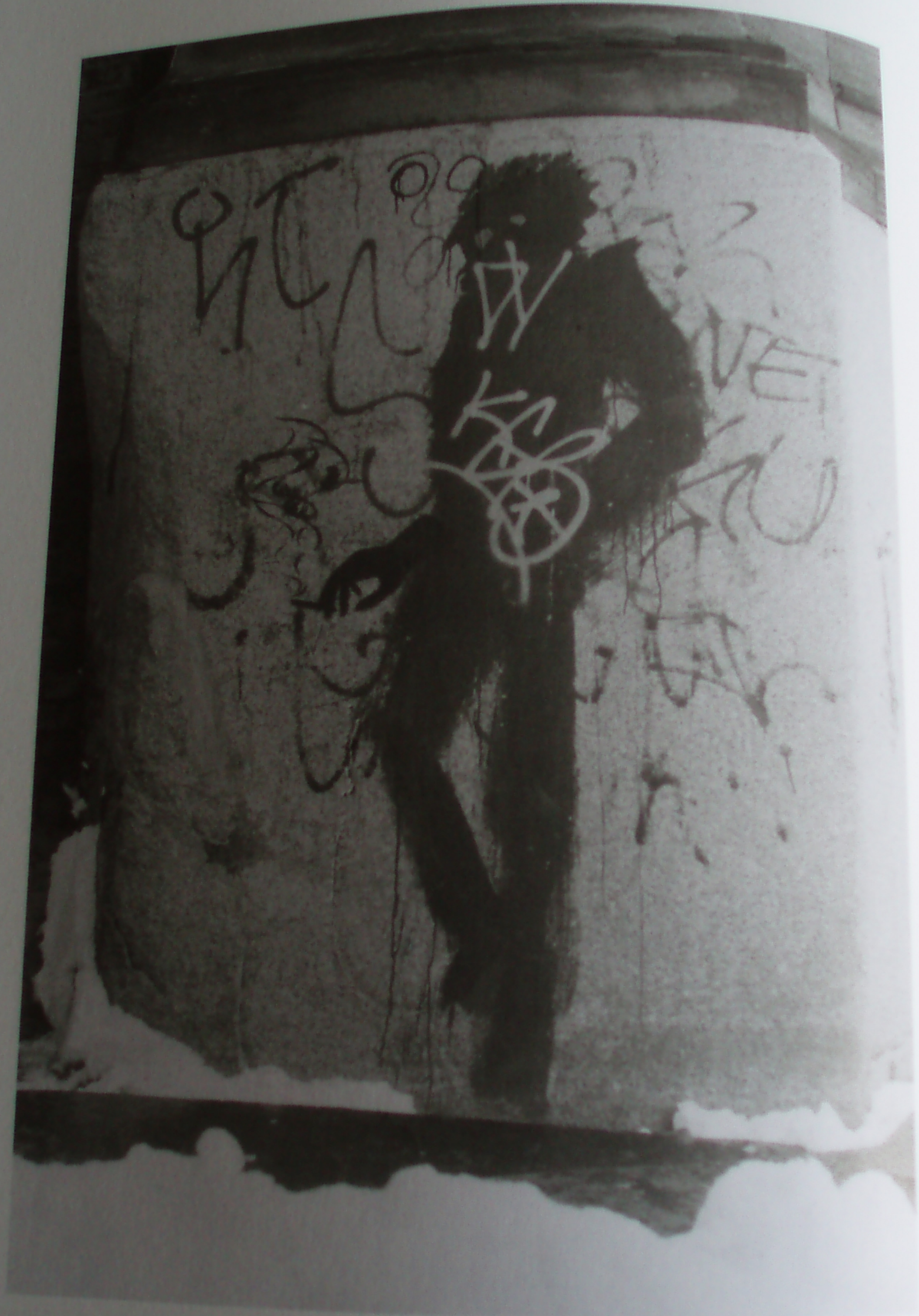

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MINI STORAGE
Self-service private rooms; personal and business sizes
757-4700
Sat-Sun
1 97
Max to close
Enter after 3:45PM
2 41
Max to close
Up to 1 hr
5 26












83


ER ST.
PARKING






M. ZIESK
OPTICIA
Rx FILLED ACCURATELY
CH. 3-0209
281-6TH AVE



















No one questions the fact that Haring and Hambleton primarily have their urban works to thank for their fame, but it would be equally untenable to accuse them of having just used it to stage their own advertising campaigns. Both of them displayed great dedication in giving expression to complex societal issues in their work and thus stimulating a socially diverse circle of addressees to react and reflect – an audience that far exceeds traditional museum-goers in terms of numbers.


to close

Graffiti as Instant Art

The works brought together here conform in a readily comprehensible way to the fast-paced spirit of our era of instant satisfaction. Those who are unable to find anything positive in the instant soups or instant drinks or even the instant cameras of our everyday lives today have to admit – at least in the case of certain select examples of instant art – that these have enriched us by providing one more form of communication. Three criteria could be named for assigning a work to the realm of "instant art":

First of all, there is the immediacy of its creation, its instant production: this requires working within a time limit at the location of the final presentation. Graffiti images are created under pressure in terms of time. Either there is a danger of being detained by authorities of some kind or the artist is subject to the pressure of a curious audience. Instant art is typically created not in the studio but in public, as a "public piece," so to speak – and this enables its immediate viewing, its instant reception. Haring, in particular, has referred to his direct contact with his audience as a stimulus for his richly varied work in New York's subway system. "After a while, my subway drawings became more of a responsibility than a hobby. So many people wished me luck and told me to 'keep it up' that it became difficult to stop. From the beginning, one of my main incentives was this contact with people. It became a rewarding experience to draw and to see the drawings being appreciated. The number of people passing one of these drawings in a week was phenomenal. Even if the drawing remained up for only one day, enough people saw it to make it easily worth my effort."

A further criterion could be added in order to distinguish graffiti art from the bored scribbling of "painters" who are just seizing a chance to pass time: direct acknowledgement through an audience – instant recognition. This last element is lacking in all those instant artworks which are only able to engage their viewers when an additional explanation is provided, for example, in the case of ready-mades. Instant art is always immediately understood, whether it is a performance, a jazz improvisation – or graffiti art.

Graffiti works are us
Keith Haring or Ha
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about the theme

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understood
the advanta

Graffiti works are usually public and anonymous. Even the most famous graffiti artists – such as Keith Haring or Harald Naegeli – always leave their works unsigned. This does not make them representatives of folk art, although this claim is often made. Instead, it is about further under scoring the intended immediacy of their message within the public space. Thus, for many viewers, the thing "hanging" in New York's subway stations is not a Haring but a striking statement about the theme of fear or power.

Even the subway graffiti writers choose pseudonyms that will appeal to groups and the general public for their colorful logos, and these often stand for an entire collective of creators who have worked on a subway car together. As already mentioned, though, these works are created within a different social context: a bare declaration of existence is the most essential aim here.

Furthermore, graffiti images are also illegal and unsaleable and thus, in a double sense, they reside outside the official and commercial art scene. Graffiti on canvas does not exist: the work is always done directly on the objects of the urban environment – concrete walls or subway cars. In this way, graffiti once again shows its commitment to the criterion of immediacy and, simultaneously, secures a highly elemental and unique character for itself. The fact that this involves violating legal prohibitions must be considered irrelevant to the artistic evaluation of these wall paintings. This is all the more true since authorities and the legal system should also not be expected, let alone required, to evaluate the artistic intentions or abilities of graffiti painters. As long as spaces for cultural, but also political, freedom are restricted through laws, boundaries will be crossed and violated. And that is how things should be, because artistic manifestations understood in the sense of suggestions or critiques from those on the outside certainly work to the advantage of a society's cultural development.

Although graffiti is to be understood as art in the public space, enterprising gallerists have not hesitated to try to bring spray paint into the living room. Still, the proud owners of sprayed pictures remain, at best, sympathizers of graffiti.

Evidently, works that resist commodification possess a special appeal in our consumerist society; thus, in recent years, even the advertising divisions of department stores have imitated colorful sprayed scenes in their display windows. Put to the test in this plagiarized form in the service of official commerce, graffiti once again demonstrated its public appeal.

Whether in a gallery or department story, a museum or collection – urban works cannot be commercialized or preserved. They are only open to indirect or mediated forms of exploitation. Questions of museological survival and copyright are foreign to graffiti originals, which nonetheless manifest themselves as the most primal art form of our age.


ART SHOW

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Interview of Richard Hambleton by Mette Madsen, March 1985. Published in catalogue of the Zellermayer Galerie, Berlin, 1985.

Images on pages 301, 302, 303: Zellermayer Galerie Berlin.

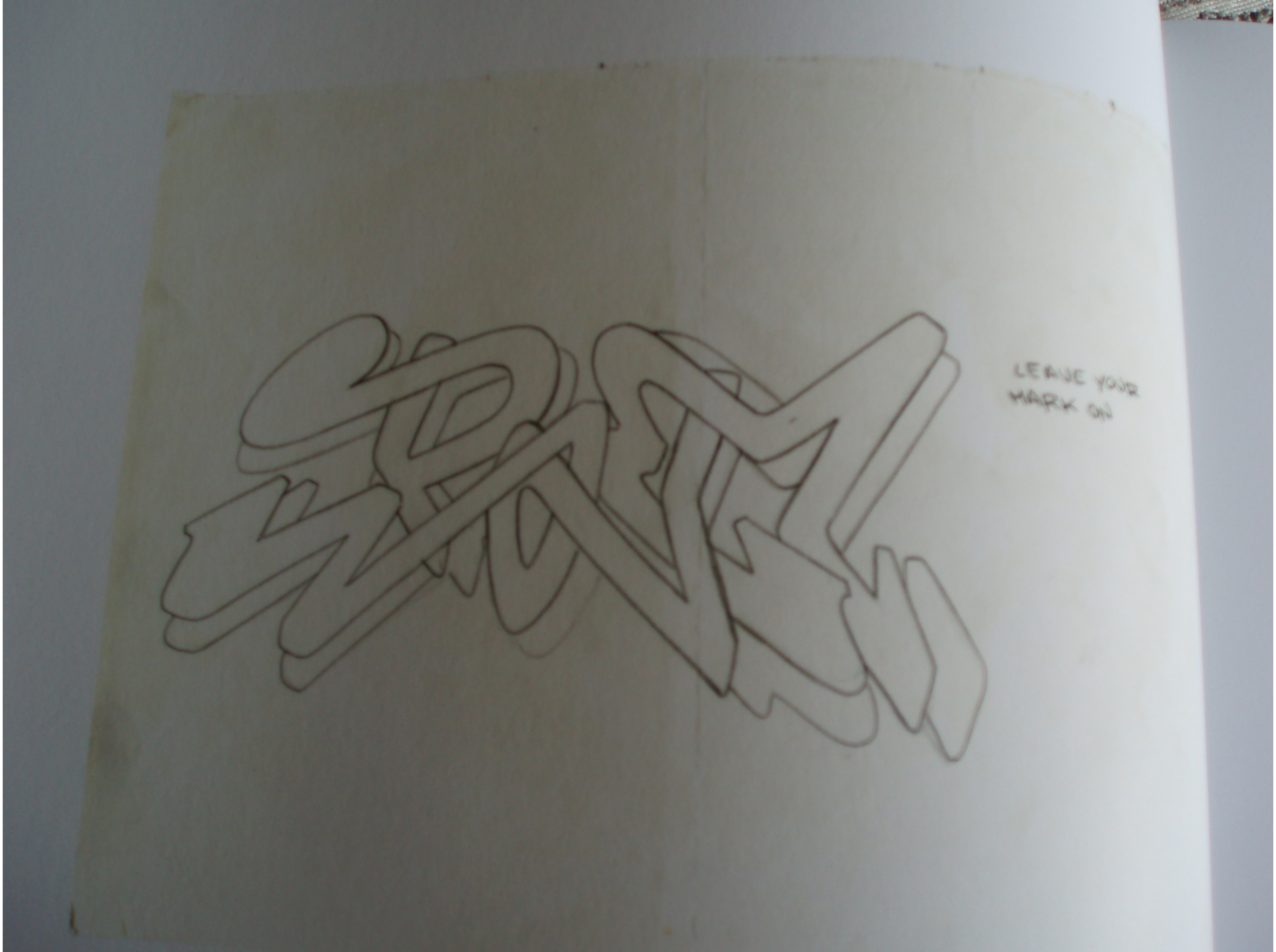
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Black Book Sketches


GTA
UA
Fill in - BAby blue
From Jake
to Thomas
New York
Feb 83


LEAVE YOUR
MARK ON





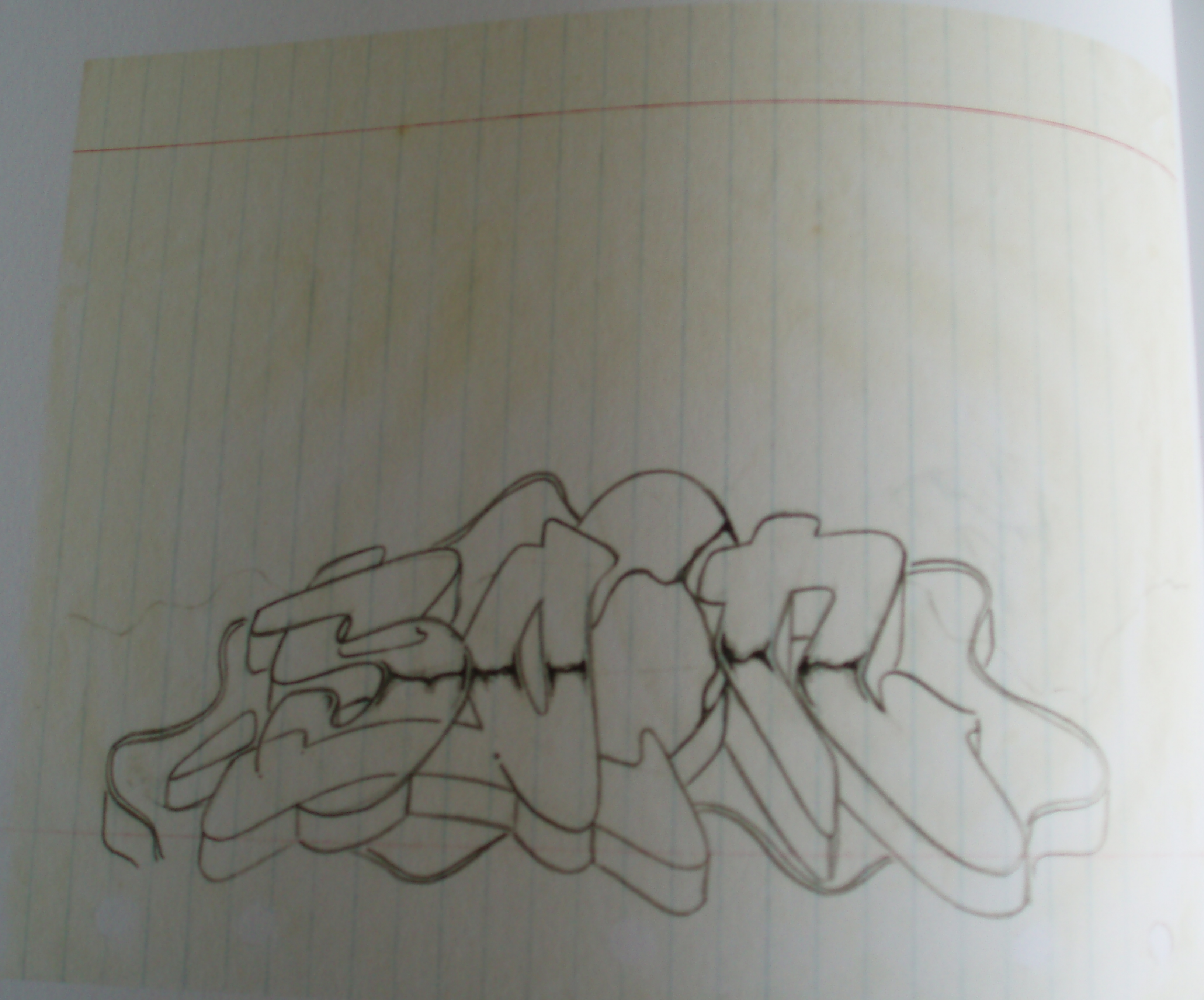

UNITED
ARTIST
POEY.




BUSTER BROWN
Sonia
REST
RUSH

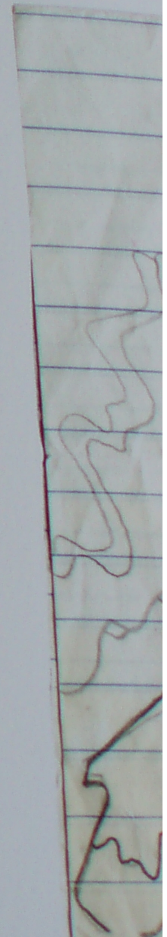

POISE
TOP.
FM.
ZOOBANG.






"I WANNA get serious"
JOHN AS POEM


"KINGS DONT DIE"
ANOTHER Seen





Letters

DEAR THOMAS "C" 8-1-83

I HOPE WHEN YOU RECIVE THIS LETTER IT FINDS YOU IN THE BEST OF HEALTH AS FOR ME I'AM DOING JUST FINE I WAS HAPPY TO HEAR FROM YOU AND YES THE PICTURE'S WERE SPLENDED & I THANK YOU VERY MUCH THEY CAME OUT BEAUTIFULL WELL THOMAS I'AM SENDING YOU A PICTURE OF A RECENT CAR I DID WITH A FRIEND IT'S A KEN & SHAME AND I HOPE IT WILL BE PUBLISHED IN YOUR BOOK ON N.Y.C. GRAFFITTI AND ALSO ENCLOSED IS 2 SKETCHES AND WHEN YOU COMPLETE YOUR BOOK I HOPE YOU WILL MAIL ME A COPY I WOULD BE THANKFUL THOMAS I WANT TO FIND SOMETHING WHEN YOU TOOK PICTURE'S OF MY CAR DID YOU TAKE PICTURE'S OF THE ONE NEXT IT IT SAID BRIM & MACK IF YOU DID I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW IF YOU COULD SEND ME THE PICTURE'S WELL THOMAS IT'S BEEN NICE MEETING YOU IF YOUR EVER IN THE NEIGHBOR HOOD STOP BY MY HOUSE YOU HAVE MY ADDRESS FEEL FREE.

YOUR FRIEND "KEN" TAT TAC

P.S. WRITE BACK AS SOON AS YOU CAN AND BY THEN I SHOULD MORE PICTURE'S TO SEND YOU ALSO SKETCHES TAKE CARE & BE PEACE...

NEW YORK CITY GRAFFITI CATCH IT

DEAR THOMAS "C"

9-19-83

I HOPE AT THE ARIVAL OF THIS LETTER
IT FIND'S YOU IN GOOD HEALTH AS FOR
ME I'AM STILL DOING ART ON THE
TRAIN'S I WROTE YOU A LETTER & IN THE
LETTER I ENCIOSED A PICTURE AND SOME
SKECTHINGS FOR YOUR BOOK THAT YOU
ARE PRINTING AND YOU NEVER ANSWERD
BACK WELL ANY WAY I SAW RAZ THE
OTHER DAY & HE TOLD ME THAT HE
WROTE YOU AND THAT YOU NEVER ANSWERED
HIM SO I TOLD HIM THAT YOU WERE
PROBALY BUSY & THAT YOU WILL GET
IN TOUCH & BY THE WAY THOMAS I
WOULD LIKE TO KNOW IF YOU COULD SEND
ME A COPY OF THE CAR'S POEM & RAZ
DID ALSO IF YOU HAVE THE CAR
OF BRIM & MACK I WOULD LIKE COPIES
BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE THEM & BRIM
ALWAYS ASK'S ME WHEN WOULD I BE
ABIE TO GET THEM SO I TOLD HIM
THAT I WOULD HAVE TO GET IN TOUCH
WITH THOMAS TO SEE IF HE WOULD
SEND ME A COPY

OVER

WELL THOMAS I HAVE TO GO NOW
I HOPE YOU WON'T FOR GET TO PUT
MY ART WORK IN YOUR BOOK THAT
YOU A PRINTING AND ALSO IF IT IS
POSSIBLE I WOULD LIKE A COPY OF
THE BOOK WHEN IT IS PUBLISHED.
TAKE CARE & HOPE YOU WOULD STAY
IN TOUCH.

YOUR FRIEND



P.S. I'LL BE IN TOUCH WITH ANY UP TO
DATE CHANGES PEACE

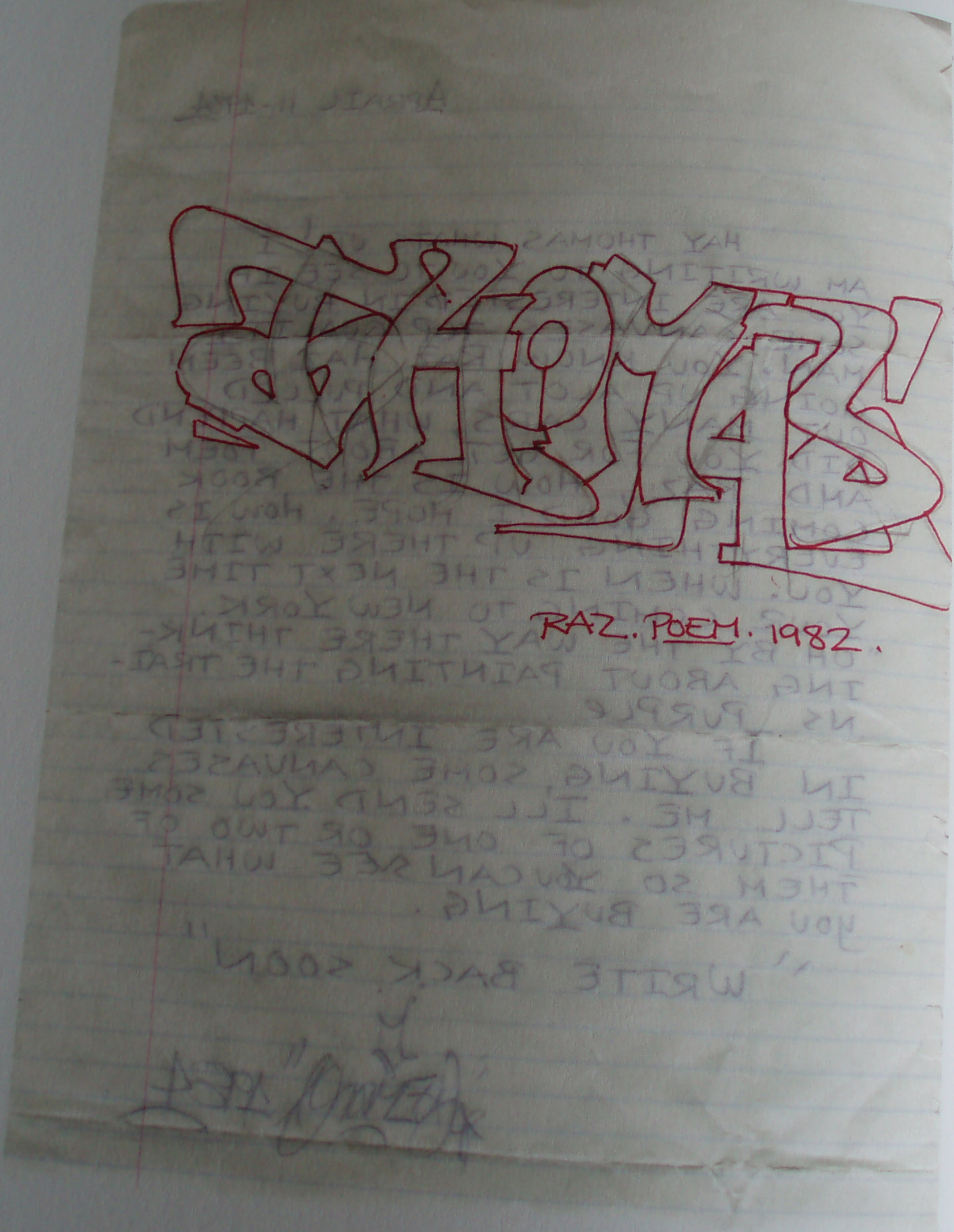
APRAIL 11-1984

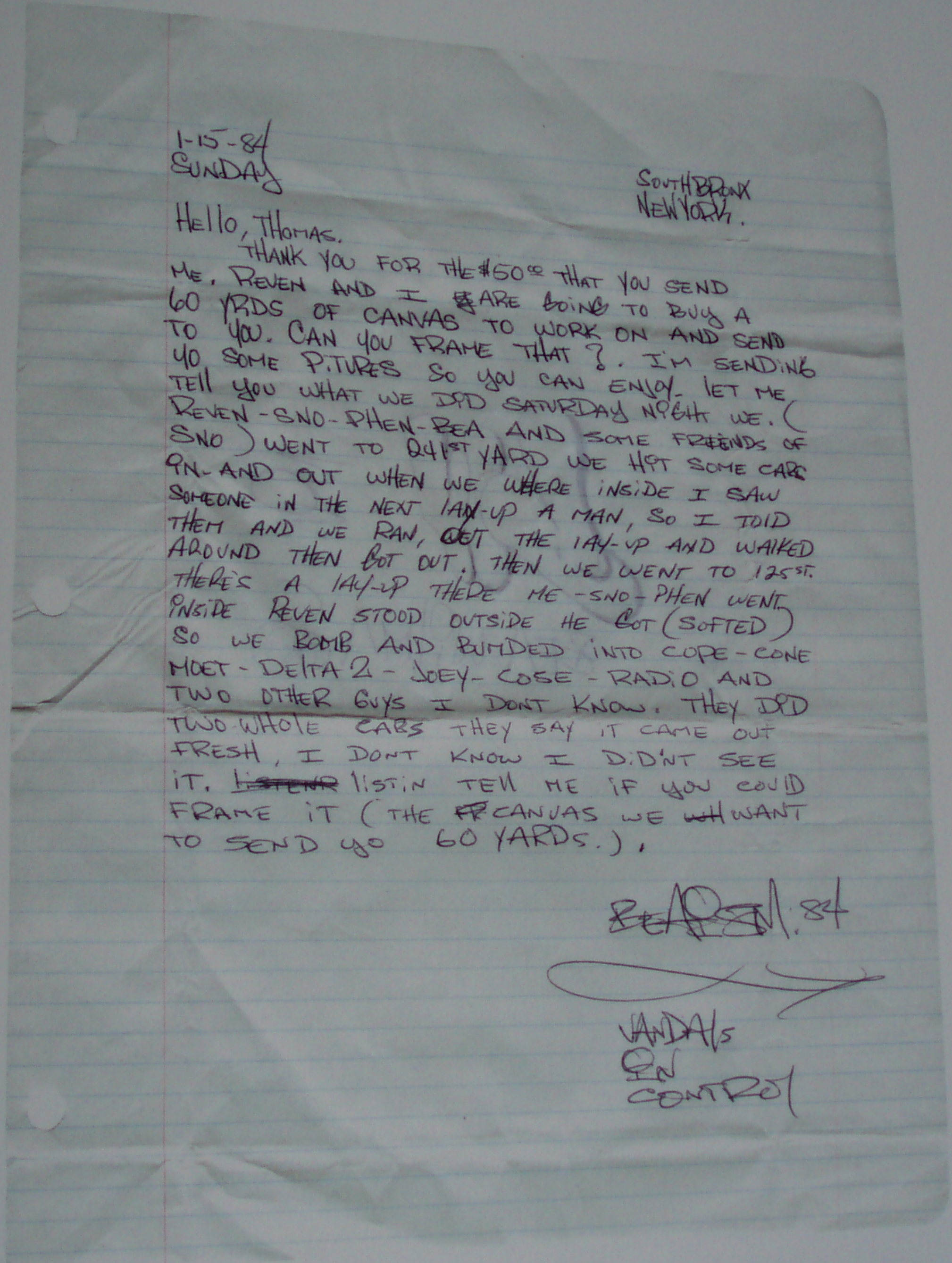
HAY THOMAS WHATS UP! I
AM WRITING TO YOU TO SEE IF
YOU ARE INTERESTED IN BUYING
SOME CANVASES TOP QUALITY
MAN. YOU KNOW RAZ HAZ BEEN
GOING UP ALOT AND PULLED
OUT MANY CARS, WHAT HAPPEND
DID YOU FOR GET ABOUT POEM
AND RAZ, HOW IS THE BOOK
COMING GOOD I HOPE. HOW IS
EVERYTHING UP THERE WITH
YOU. WHEN IS THE NEXT TIME
YOUR COMING TO NEW YORK.
"OH BY THE WAY THERE THINK-
ING ABOUT PAINTING THE TRAI-
NS PURPLE

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED
IN BUYING, SOME CANVASES
TELL ME. I'LL SEND YOU SOME
PICTURES OF ONE OR TWO OF
THEM SO YOU CAN SEE WHAT
YOU ARE BUYING.

"WRITE BACK SOON"

1984


RAZ. POEM. 1982.



1-15-84
SUNDAY

SOUTH BRONX
NEW YORK.

Hello, Thomas.
THANK YOU FOR THE $50.00 THAT YOU SEND
ME. REVEN AND I ARE GOING TO BUY A
60 YRDS OF CANVAS TO WORK ON AND SEND
TO YOU. CAN YOU FRAME THAT? I'M SENDING
YO SOME PITURES SO YOU CAN ENJOY. LET ME
TELL YOU WHAT WE DID SATURDAY NIGHT WE. (
REVEN-SNO-PHEN-BEA AND SOME FRIENDS OF
SNO) WENT TO 241ST YARD WE HIT SOME CARS
IN AND OUT WHEN WE WHERE INSIDE I SAW
SOMEONE IN THE NEXT LAY-UP A MAN, SO I TOLD
THEM AND WE RAN, OUT THE LAY-UP AND WALKED
AROUND THEN GOT OUT. THEN WE WENT TO 125ST.
THERE'S A LAY-UP THERE ME-SNO-PHEN WENT
INSIDE REVEN STOOD OUTSIDE HE GOT (SOFTED)
SO WE BOMB AND BUMPED INTO COPE-CONE
MOET-DELTA 2-JOEY-COSE-RADIO AND
TWO OTHER GUYS I DONT KNOW. THEY DID
TWO WHOLE CARS THEY SAY IT CAME OUT
FRESH, I DONT KNOW I DIDN'T SEE
IT. ~~LISTEN~~ LISTIN TELL ME IF YOU COULD
FRAME IT (THE CANVAS WE WANT
TO SEND YO 60 YARDS.).

[illegible] 84

VANDALS
IN
CONTROL

Betrifft Buchkauf

Ich Simon Fré ein Break Tänzer würde gerne auskunft bekommen wie teuer das Graffiti Buch ist von Thomas Christ. Den ich muss zuerst wissen wie teuer das Buch ist dann kann ich das Geld schicken und Sie mir das Buch. Wenn Sie so nett wären würden Sie mir an einem Abend um 18³⁰ bescheid geben meine Telephonnummer und Adresse: Simon Fré Birchstr. 90 8050 ZH
Tel. 01/312.31.25.
Ich danke Ihnen im Voraus

Mit Freundlichen
Grüssen
Simon Fré

2 Fifth Avenue #20A
New York, N.Y. 10011

19 Januar 1984

Lieber Thomas:

heute abend zeigten sie hier am television Channel 13 eine Stunde lang einen Film über Deine Freunde, die graffiti Maler. Wünschte Du hättest ihn sehen können. Dein "Merry Christmas" Wagen war auch mit dabei. Das ganze war wunderschön fotografiert mit Musikuntermalung von rock bis Wagner, break-dance Szenen und Interviews mit den einzelnen Malern. Dazwischen unser Mayor und seine "Abwehrmassnahmen" - eine neue Art von Stacheldraht mit Dornen so scharf wie Rasierklingen, scharfen Polizeihunden, die zwischen den Stachldrahtverhauen hin und her patroullieren. Das sah aus wie der Todesstreifen an der DDR Grenze. Dazu die Stimme des Volkes _ein Polizei-Detektiv "That is no art - I'm not an art critic, but that's no art! Frauen mit Reinlichkeitsfimmel: "They should be made to clean up that mess", und Angestellte der Subway:"We are moving two million people each day - they have a right too." Aber das traurigste waren die jüngeren Maler, die sagten, dass ihre Kunst systematisch von neidischen anderen graffiti Malern übermalt würde. Es ist anscheinend ein Krieg im Gange und die "Übermaler" waren auch zu sehen: brutale Typen in camouflage Jacken und army Mützen. Der Film heisst "Style Wars."

Wollte Dir das nur schnell erzählen, um Dich über die Graffiti Szene auf dem laufenden zuhalten. Keith Herring malte zu Weihnachten überall die Mutter Gottes mit Kind auf seine schwarzen Tafeln, alles in einem Strich. Sehr schön!

Es schneit und ist kalt. Wie geht's bei Euch. Muss dies wieder nach Basel schicken, weil ich die Londoner Adresse nicht lesen konnte. Viele Grüsse - Cenita

P.S. Film wurde von Tony Silver und Henry Chalfont produziert, falls Dir das etwas sagt.

Book Reviews

"Sonntag" 3. Okt. 84

Jugendbox



Graffiti in New York. Foto von Thomas Christ

Graffiti

New York, Subway-Station (Untergrundbahn-Station).

Ohrenbetäubender Lärm, ein Zug braust in die stinkende verrusste Haltestelle, bleibt heulend stehen. Einen Augenblick lang Stille. Einen Augenblick lang ist es auch möglich, die überdimensionierten, grellen Schriftzüge auf dem «train» zu erfassen. Ein starkes Stück. Kunst liegt in New York nicht nur auf der Strasse, sondern auch unter der Strasse, in den Subways.

Aus der Bronx kommen sie und aus anderen Armenvierteln New Yorks. Sie malen (graffiare: kratzen) selbstgewählte Namen und Übernamen. Sie, die Graffiti-«writers».

Mit Säcken voller Spraydosen, deren Anzahl sie vorher genau berechnen, schleichen sie sich in Gruppen gegen Mitternacht in die Tunnel, wo die Züge stehen. Nach äusserst gewagten und möglichst geräuschlosen Klettereien beginnt die rasche Arbeit: Vorzeichnen der fülligen Riesenbuchstaben, Ausmalen der Flächen; stets mit angehaltenem Atem beim Drücken auf die Spraydüse – denn sonst fällt man nach kurzer Zeit in Ohnmacht! Aber nicht die Spraydosen sind die eigentliche Gefahr: Die für den reibungslosen Ablauf des New Yorker Subway-Systems zuständige «Metropolitan Transit Authority» hat den jungen Graffiti-Künstlern das Fürchten beigebracht und den Kampf angesagt. Mit doppelmaschigen Zäunen, Spezial-Stacheldraht, abgerichteten Schäferhunden wird verbissen versucht, sie von ihren Spray-Aktionen abzuhalten.

Die Graffiti-«writers» sind deshalb gezwungen, ihrer verbotenen und verpönten Kunst im Versteckten, bei Nacht und Nebel, belästigt von angriffslustigen Ratten und in diebischer Windeseile zu frönen. A dangerious thing!

Sie nehmen die Gefahren auf sich. Nicht, um Leute in vornehmen, reichen Stadtteilen auf Ungerechtigkeit aufmerksam zu machen oder sie zu schockieren, vielmehr um sich mit anderen aus der gleichen sozialen Schicht und etwa im gleichen Alter zu messen und um zu imponieren. Das Ganze ist wie ein Spiel mit klaren Spielregeln: Der gewählte Schriftzug eines Graffiti-«writers» muss möglichst oft in der gleichen Art auf vielen Zügen auftauchen. Der «writer» wird so nach und nach bekannt, berühmt und schafft es vielleicht schliesslich, als «king» respektiert zu werden. An der «hall of fame», einer Pausenhofwand in einer Schule Harlems, kann er sich als solcher verewigen. That's it!

Der oft versuchte Vergleich mit der Parolenmalerei an den Wänden europäischer Grossstädte ist unrichtig, denn diese will Inhalte vermitteln. New Yorker Graffiti hingegen ist Gestaltung.

Es wird sich zeigen, ob die Sprayer den lauernden Gefahren weiterhin gewachsen sind und ob sie auch in Zukunft versuchen, zur Belebung des New Yorker Untergrunds beizutragen.

Brieffreundschaft

Christy-Anne Collis 914), 2415 Alpine Credcent, Victoria, V.C., Canada, V8N4B5. I would like to have an english-speaking pen pal from Europe. I collect stamps, love music and animals and participate in many sports.

Spruch der Woche

Ich antworte mit einem entschiedenen Vielleicht

„Hieroglyphen der Gegenwart“

Zur Ausstellung „Subway Graffiti“ im Basler Gewerbemuseum

„Die New Yorker Graffiti-Szene verblüfft ihre Umwelt seit bald 20 Jahren. Ihre graphisch-künstlerische Gestaltung hat heute zweifellos einen Höhepunkt erreicht. Aber gerade diese Vervollkommnung veranlaßt die staatlichen Autoritäten mit immer schärferen und raffinierteren Mitteln einzugreifen, um die neue Kunstform zu unterdrücken und zu vernichten. Die Parallelität dieser Entwicklung ist kein Zufall – Graffiti ist Selbstdarstellung und Überlebenskampf in einem.“ So der Schweizer Thomas Christ zu seiner Ausstellung „Graffiti in New York – Subkultur in der Subway“, die derzeit im Basler Gewerbemuseum zu sehen ist.

Christ, der sich einige Monate in New York aufhielt und dort die Bekanntschaft mit einer Graffiti-Sprayer-Gruppe, den „Vandals in Control“, machte, zeigt im Gewerbemuseum Fotografien von derber und gleichzeitig mächtiger Schönheit. Bilder, die automatisch die Frage nach der technischen Bewältigung dieser Werke aufwerfen. Hier werden neue Buchstabenformen erfunden oder alte variiert, mit erstaunlichem Gespür Farbzusammenstellungen gefunden.

Christs Reportage aus dem New Yorker Subway-Untergrund ist auch gleichzeitig Ausdruck der Entstehung solcher Kunstwerke. Subway-Graffiti ist eine Ausdrucksform Jugendlicher aus sozial benachteiligten Quartieren in und um New York; es begann vor zwei Jahrzehnten mit dem einfachen Malen (graffiare = kratzen) von selbstgewählten Namen oder Übernamen. Diese Anfänge erscheinen auf den Bildern von Christ als Mutproben – unbeholfene Kritzeleien auf U-Bahn-Wagen.

Das Verfolgen der Wandlung der Graffiti-Malerei in New York ist dann das eigentlich Faszinierende an dieser Ausstellung. Aus den Kinderhandmalereien wurden komplexe verschlungene Figuren, offenbart sich ein Wandel vom simplen Schriftzug zum groß-angelegten Werk, von der Einfarbigkeit zur Mehrfarbigkeit. Außerdem beweist Christ auch, daß der Vergleich mit der europäischen Parolenmalerei in Großstädten hinkt. Die „writers“ in New York wollen keine Inhalte vermitteln, sondern Gestaltung sein.

Es ist manchmal einfach unvorstellbar, wie derartige Kunstwerke an einen der verlotterten U-Bahn-Wagen New Yorks gelangen können. Christ gibt mit seinen farbigen Fotografien auch Hinweise auf den sozialen Hintergrund der Graffiti-Malerei. „Angesichts der Tatsache, daß ihre soziale Umgebung (die der „writer“) vor allem Kriminalität oder Verwahrlosung fördert, müssen ihre farbigen ‚Egotrips' als bedeutende Leistungen gewertet werden, in sozialer wie in künstlerischer Hinsicht“, meint Christ. Wer Graffiti-Kunst als soziales Phänomen begreift, versteht auch den Machtkampf unter den Sprayer-Gruppen, der mit Farbe ausgetragen wird und meist zum Übermalen von gegnerischen Bildern führt.

Nicht deutlich wird die Gefahr der nächtlichen Graffiti-Malerei. Schon lange gehen die U-Bahn-Betreiber gegen die „writer“ mit unverhältnismäßigen Mitteln wie auf Spraygeruch abgerichteten Schäferhunden, speziell ausgebildeten Sicherheitskräften oder Doppel-Stacheldraht vor. Entsprechend ist die Graffiti-Malerei einzuschätzen, ist man gebannt von der Individualität und Ausdruckskraft der Schriftbilder – eine „Hieroglyphenwelt der Gegenwart“, wie Thomas Christ meint.

Roland Papenberg



„SUBKULTUR IN DER SUBWAY“ nennt der Schweizer Thomas Christ seine Ausstellung im Basler Gewerbemuseum über Graffiti-Malerei in New York etwa, wie unser Beispiel, an alten U-Bahn-Wagen.

Foto: aep

NORDSCHWEIZ
Basler Volksblatt

Freitag, 17. August 1984



Miss-es heisst das Pseudonym des Sprayers.

Fotoausstellung über New Yorker Graffiti im Gewerbemuseum

«Schriftattacken» auf Eisenbahnwagen

In der Fotogalerie des Gewerbemuseums war Buch-Vernissage. «Graffiti in New York» nennt sich das Buch und «Subway Graffiti in New York» ist die Fotoausstellung überschrieben. Beides, Buch und Foto stammen vom gleichen Autor Thomas Christ.

Basel. Sh. Der 1953 in Zürich geborene Thomas Christ hat an der hiesigen Universität in Jurisprudenz abgeschlossen. Sein Doktorvater Frank Vischer hielt die Vernissagerede. Er kam dabei auch auf das Problem der Illegalität zu sprechen. Erst der hohe Zeitdruck und die Gefahr beim illegalen Entstehungsprozess in nur wenigen Stunden im Dunkel der Nacht bringe die Qualität hervor, die die Spray-Bilder auszeichne und auf den Zürcher Sprayer Harald Nägeli gemünzt fragte der Jurist Vischer: «Ist es nicht Aufgabe des Staates mitzuspielen, und nicht zu bestrafen?» Zürcher Juristen und Basler Juristen scheinen da gegenteiliger Meinung zu sein.

Anzumerken bleibt eigentlich nur, dass sich die Kunst nicht definieren lässt, hingegen basiert jede Rechtssprechung auf sehr genauer Definition – Kunst und Recht sind zwei verschiedene Dinge, Konflikte unvermeidbar.

Dies scheint sich auch Thomas Christ bewusst zu sein, suchte er doch mit seinen Fotos nicht die Illegalität des Entstehungsprozesses umzusetzen, sondern setzte er ganz auf das Dokumentarische. Sein Bestreben war es, möglichst genau die Spraybilder auf den Subway-Wagen wiederzugeben. Er fotografierte zumeist bei hellstem Sonnenschein, und er sucht wenn immer möglich den gesamten Schriftzug wiederzugeben. Sehr viele Aufnahmen sind frontal entstanden, bei Stillstand der Eisenbahnwagen. Er ermöglicht dadurch dem Betrachter, die einzelnen Spraybilder zu studieren.

Eine Entwicklung lässt sich ablesen: waren frühere Graffitis (von vor zehn Jahren) viel chaotischer und aggressiver, so suchen die heutigen Jugendlichen (zumeist 14- bis 17jährige aus keineswegs privilegierten Schichten) eigentliche Bilder zu schaffen. Sie malen heute Schriftzüge mit ihren Namen. Da die Organisation einer solchen «Schriftattacke» auf den Eisenbahnwagen genauestens geplant sein muss (vom Fixieren des Begriffs und des Schriftbildes bis zum Beschaffen der Spraydosen) haben sich die Jugendlichen in Gangs zusammengeschlossen, was dazuführt, dass «gangtypische» Schriftbilder auszumachen sind und dass sich die Gangs in ihren Schriftbildern bekämpfen, indem sie sich gegenseitig die Schriftbilder übermalen (es ist kein «West-Side-Story»-Kampf, ein Graffiti-Kampf erschöpft sich in den Schriftbildern).

Sucht man bei uns nach Vergleichbarem so fallen einem Telefonzeichnungen ein, oder alte Schulpulte, wo irgendjemand seinen Schriftzug (als eine manifeste Spur seiner selbst) hinterlassen hat. In New York schicken die Jugendlichen ihren riesenhaften Schriftzug auf Reisen: nur selten sehen sie ihr Bild wieder, denn die Wagen fahren in der ganzen Stadt herum. Vergleicht man die wenigen Innenaufnahmen mit den äusseren Schriftbildern, so fällt auf, dass sich innen noch die Aggressivität von vor zehn Jahren gehalten hat. Innen finden sich denn auch mehr Schlagworte mit politischem oder anderem Inhalt. Die latente Aggressivität, die im Innern herrscht, schlägt sich dort nieder. Aussen hingegen ist nichts mehr davon zu spüren.

(Gewerbemuseum bis 16. September. Thomas Christ: Subway-Graffiti, 1984, erhältlich im Gewerbemuseum oder der Galerie von Bartha.)

Basler Zeitung

Donnerstag, 16. August 1984
Nr. 191

Photoausstellung «Subway Graffiti» im Gewerbemuseum

Zephir, Scop & Breezer



New Yorks U-Bahnwagen in künstlerischer Verwandlung auf Photos festgehalten.

Photo André Muelhaupt

Im Norden der Insel Manhattan, New York, befindet sich einer der vielen «subway yards» (Wagen-Depots), wo die Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) ihre Reservewagen stehen hat. Dort schleichen sich seit ungefähr zwanzig Jahren – so alt ist die New Yorker «Subway Graffiti» – die Sprayer ein und bemalen die Wagen. Früher kamen sie oft allein, heute kommen sie meistens in Gruppen, mit genauen Vorstellungen und Skizzen sowie einer genau berechneten Anzahl von farbigen Spraydosen, die vorher gestohlen wurden.

Innerhalb von vier Stunden werden die Wagen bemalt, meistens unter Lebensgefahr: Aggressive Ratten, abgerichtete Schäferhunde, schiessfreudige Polizisten und die tödliche Stromzufuhr bedrohen die Graffiti-Gruppen. Ausserdem muss das Wetter stimmen: ~~Es darf weder zu kalt noch zu warm sein~~. Allerdings gelang der MTA in ihrem jahrelang erfolglosen Kampf gegen die Graffiti-Gruppen ein erster Erfolg: Die Subway-Wagen werden mit Graffiti-resistentem Weiss gestrichen.

Im Gewerbemuseum dokumentiert nun eine Photoausstellung von Thomas Christ die Graffiti-Bewegung. Christ, der über ein halbes Jahr in New York lebte, wurde mit einer Graffiti-Gang bekannt, durch die er tiefe Einblicke in die Bewegung gewann, die in den letzten Jahren zur Kunstform hochstilisiert wurde. An der Vernissage stellte Frank Vischer, Präsident der Kunstkommission des Kunstmuseums, Thomas Christ und sein Werk vor. Vischer betonte, dass Graffiti ursprünglich keine Kunstform gewesen sei, sondern eher mit Gruppenwettbewerb und ~~Kriegsbemalung~~ zu tun hatte. Die von Christ dokumentierte Graffiti erinnere ihn an Tätowierungen. Man dürfe auch nicht vergessen, dass diese Werke unter grossen Gefahren entstanden seien und als eine Art Mutprobe gesehen werden müssten. Diese Gefahren und die Illegalität beflügle die Sprayer, und, so fragte Vischer, habe der Zürcher Sprayer Nägeli nicht auch seine Werke im Bewusstsein der Illegalität und Gefahr gemacht? Das habe Harald Nägeli sicher beflügelt, denn seine Strichmännchen würden ihre Wirkung verlieren, wenn man sie in einer Galerie ausstelle. Auch die New Yorker Graffiti-Künstler würden nun umhergeflogen und ihre Werke ausgestellt. Aber so gezähmt bleibe das Umwerfende, das diese Kunstform ausmache, plötzlich weg. Es blieben gute Werke, die aber harmlos seien, schloss Vischer.

Die Ausstellung «Subway Graffiti in New York» im Gewerbemuseum ist noch bis zum 16. September zu sehen.

David Goldberg

Donnerstag, 16. August 1984
Basler Woche
Baselbieter Anzeiger



Die U-Bahn als Leinwand

Es ist kein Zufall, dass der Basler Thomas Christ die New Yorker Subway-Graffiti zum Foto-Thema seiner sowohl künstlerisch wie auch soziologisch hervorragenden Dokumentation aus dem Armenviertel der Bronx gemacht hat. Das hautnahe Miterleben eines scheinbar zweckfreien und aussichtslosen Überlebenskampfes jugendlicher U-Bahn-Sprayer fand in herrlichen Farbbildern seinen Niederschlag. Seine Bilder sind im Gewerbemuseum zu sehen.

Seite Kultur

KUNST

Die Welt der wilden Subway-Graffiti

Zurzeit werden im Museum für Gestaltung/Gewerbemuseum Basel Fotografien von Thomas Christ in einer sehenswerten Ausstellung präsentiert. Thomas Christ wurde 1953 in Zürich geboren und lebt heute in Basel, wo er seine Studien an der juristischen Fakultät erfolgreich abschloss.

Es ist kein Zufall, dass Thomas Christ die New Yorker Subway-Graffiti zum Thema seiner sowohl künstlerisch wie auch soziologisch hervorragenden Dokumentation aus dem Armenviertel der Bronx gemacht hat. Das hautnahe Miterleben eines scheinbar zweckfreien und aussichtslosen Überlebenskampfes jugendlicher U-Bahn-Sprayer fand in herrlichen Farbbildern seinen Niederschlag.

Beim genauen Betrachten eines Bildes erkennt man sogar die versteckte Widmung «To Thomas C . . . live from the Bronx!» Thomas Christ ist ebenso Zeichner wie Fotograf. Diese Doppelbegabung verhilft zu empfindsamem «Sehen», das bei ihm ohne grossen technischen Aufwand auskommt. So entstanden Dokumente aus einer Welt, die dem sogenannten «Normalbürger» verschlossen bleibt!

Erstaunlich, welche Dynamik und Spontaneität in der Spraygrafik seit bald zwanzig Jahren zum Erklingen kommt. Weit weg von jeglichem akademischem Schaffen bringen die Bilder Fröhlichkeit und Farbe in die trostlose Umgebung der verlotterten Subway von Bronx.

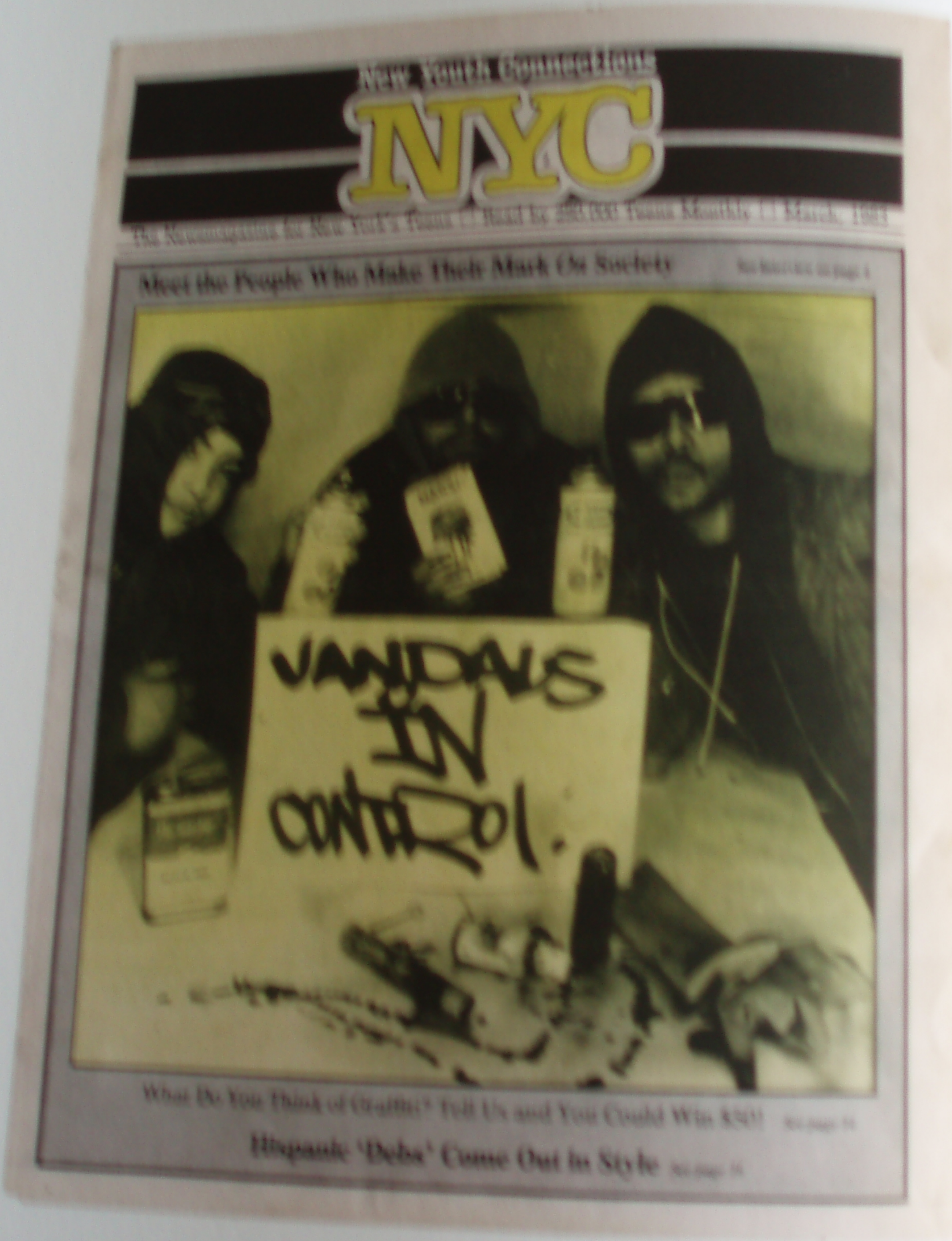
Augenfällig ist der Unterschied zur Sprayer-Szene der Schweiz. Während bei uns Kritik an der Gesellschaft im Mittelpunkt steht, feiert bei den Subway-Malern die gestalterische Form von Namenszügen fröhliche Urstände. In einem «black book» entstehen die Skizzen und werden von Gruppen von 14- bis 17jährigen Jugendlichen und Puertoricanern auf abgestellte Wagen gemeinsam aufgesprayt.

Die Gestaltung der gewählten 7 Formelemente ist denn auch das Eindrücklichste und Grund genug, von eigentlicher Graffiti-Kunst zu sprechen. Erst die Aktivitäten der New Yorker Polizei (Waffen, Hunde, Stacheldraht) waren es, die zur Kriminalisierung der Sprayer beitrugen. Bereits wurden aber zahlreiche Kunstgalerien auf die Subway-Graffiti aufmerksam. So waren auch an der «Art 84» in Basel jugendliche Sprayer aus Bronx als Gäste dabei.

Die Fotoausstellung im Gewerbemuseum Basel, Spalenvorstadt 2, dauert vom 14. August bis 16. September 1984. Dienstag bis Sonntag: 10–12 und 14–17 Uhr. Parallel zur Ausstellung erschien ein vielfarbiges Fotobuch von Thomas Christ «Subway-Graffiti».

Helmuth Kreis

Interviews


New Youth Connections
NYC
Meet the People Who Make Their Mark On Society
VANDALS IN CONTROl.
What Do You Think of Graffiti? Tell Us and You Could Win
Hispanic 'Debs' Come Out in Style

Meet the People Who Make their Mark ON Society
by Michele Linton

Is graffiti writing dangerous? BM-1: Yeah. A couple of time we almost got shot. A cop found us and said, "Who's the first one who wants to get shot?" We ran. It was the RR layup (a third track where the MTA sometimes parks trains) so we ran across the track. It was an elevated platform so the next thing we knew we were looking for the first light pole to slide down. One dude jumped, missed the pole completely, and fell on a car.

REV: Once a guy was painting next to me and you could smell the paint vapors real strong. Suddenly the train started. You know how they spark sometimes? It sparked right near him, and all of a sudden there was a fireball where he had been standing. We took off.

Why didn't that scare you away from writing? Bea: That's not much. We had been around gangs for a long time. After you've had guys chasing you with knives and guns that wasn't anything much.

Where did you get your tag? Bea: I tried lots of different names, but some didn't look right. Some didn't draw right. I tried TOKEYO, like Tokyo, but people didn't pronounce it right. So I finally hit on BEA.

REV: I tried a lot of names too, like SEARCH and FURY. I finally settled on NEVER spelled backwards, but just the first three letters. REV, like Reverend.

BEA: At first you take a lot of names, but then you settle down and stick with one. You say,"That's me."

BM-1: They call me BM. That stands for Big Man, or Big Money. It was just a regular street name.

What did you do the first time you wrote on the trains? WERK: We did motion tags. We had some regular and some homemade markers. We went in a group. We were neighborhood friends. We had done it in the neighborhood before that. I was really nervous. That first time I had to run from the cops.

SPIRO: The first thing I did was my name plain out. It was scary because I didn't want to get caught, but it was fun because I liked seeing what I could do.

After the first time how many times did you tag? WERK: A lot. It took a whole year to get fame in my neighborhood.

Why do people tag? BEA: The more you get up (get your tag in cars) the more fame you get. "BEA is up," people would say. If you get up enough, say 1,000 times, you get famous. People call you King.

BM-1: On trains everybody sees your name and people know who you are. They say, "yeah, he did this. He's alright."

WERK: People tell you, "I saw your tag." That's fame. It feels good. Also, some kids do it just to let out their anxieties.

BM-1: In a way, it's like a revolutionary thing. You may feel like doing something like killing somebody. You take your marker in your hand, and write your name. It calms you down.

WERK: We try to stay on one line so we can see our tags. We have to put our stuff where people we know can see it.

BEA: We also have to fight to control our space.

REV: It takes a long time to watch the trains and figure out their schedule. When you know, and you decide one spot is your turf, you have to control it.

RALPH: For example, if somebody's been going over your tags, you'll find him and work him over.

When do you write on trains? WERK: At nine o'clock they start laying up the trains – parking them. The night

traffic is not so heavy. So like on a weekend, we'd go about 12 o'clock.

SPIRO: We go on Sunday because it is nice and peaceful, and nobody wants to ride the train.

How often did you go? BM-1: We did it once a week.

Are drugs an important part of the scene? WERK: A lot of writers prefer to go into the yards high. Mostly they use speed, mesc, and sens. But others make sure they're straight because it requires concentration.

Has there been any change in the way they patrol the yards? ZIM: We go to 180th street. They just put up gates and fences with barbed wire.

WERK: You used to be able to walk into the yard from the station. Now you can't with the fence.

What's the easiest yard to get into? RALPH: The #4 at Mosholu Parkway. The fences are full of holes, but they're re-fencing everything now.

BEA: We get keys to the trains, sometimes by mugging the conductors. One guy is notorious for the stuff he's got. He has anything and everything: keys for every kind of door, uniforms, badges, conductor's hats. He can get into substations. He'll just open one up from the street, and bang, he's in the system. Once we're in, we bomb the inside (tag every available spot) for recognition to show it's our car. We do it until there's no room for anyone else. Some people become famous for it. They practically own one line. They're called "24-7s." They bomb 24 hours a day, seven day a week. Sometimes we even get the solvent that the MTA uses to clean the inside of the trains and carry it with us to clean up the headboards (the best spots in the train to tag) so we can put in our own tags.

Do you plan what you're going to do? REV: Everyone has black books. They sketch out things they'd like to throw up. We'll break down the job at first. One of us will design the style. Another will select the colors. And the third will choose the characters. Then we'll all get together and work out the details until we get something we like.

RALPH: It takes three to four hours to throw up an entire car. You have to wait for the right weather too. If it's too cold, the paint will run. As you paint you have to wait for sections to dry before you can overpaint. You have to correct mistakes that you see as you go along. We work in sections, so they have to come together.

How much paint does it take to do a whole car? RALPH: It takes 25-50 cans to do an entire car, at $4 a can. That's why we have to steal it. But even kids who have money steal paint. I know one guy whose family owns a Chinese restaurant. On the weekends he's not writing on cars he's off skiing somewhere. But he steals his paint.

RALPH: A couple of years ago when KEAN did the bicentennial train – all 10 cars – he used 1,000 cans of paint. We're working out a project even bigger than that. We plan to do an entire train, both sides.

WERK: We're going to do one after I get accepted into college. It's going to be my celebration. We're going to do a scroll with a message and two characters in the middle, and our names on it. Stealing paint is called racking up. Being brave enough to go racking up is part of being accepted.

RALPH: To get into our crew (Vandals in Control – VIC) you have to rack for us.

BEA: It's getting harder to get paint. Stores are becoming more careful with their spray paint. When the owner looks over at the rack and sees that 50 cans are gone by the afternoon, and he's only sold one, he wises up and starts putting them away. In the stores in my neighborhood they practically keep them locked away in the basement. In some stores I can go in and get 10 cans up against my body. You have to dress like a student. You have to go in and act natural, ask questions, browse, like any other customer. Nowadays we mainly go out of state, because they're not hip.

Is it hard to get in a crew? BEA: Yes, there are always people dying to get in.

RALPH: People steal our tag, VIC. They'll put up their work and sign it with our tag because they want to be part of us. Our crew name stands for Vandals in Control.

WERK: I'm in Bronx Artists. It's a group. Mainly we hang out together. The more good writers you have in your group, and the more you get up on the line, the more fame your group has.

How many crew members work together on a train? ZIM: We usually work with about eight in a group.

WERK: Sometimes when the crew leader gets to know his yard he goes alone with one other guy, but generally they go in groups for safety.

For safety against cops? WERK: For safety against cops and other groups if there is war going on.

REV: When you're in a tunnel or yard every sound can make you jump. You're trying to concentrate on what you're painting, but you keep having to look over your shoulder. So we usually have several guys writing while four or five watch the yard to see if anything's coming.

WERK: Lately, there's been a lot of fighting among clubs. It's gotten down to guys having gun fights over graffiti. Like when somebody's stuff has been crossed out. It's almost like a graffiti war.

BEA: One writer with the tag PJ shot another writer called PG because his tag was too close.

REV: Someone will work with you for a month, he'll be down with the crew. Then all of a sudden he'll turn on you. He'll frame you, set you up for a fight. Even in the Bronx it's getting out of hand. When we controlled the #4 train it was good, but now there are so many wild kids that it's no good.

BEA: Out of the 50 writers you'll find at the Bench (at the 149th Street and the Grand Concourse station) 40 of them will be in a fight within a month about graffiti.

Do most writers carry weapons? WERK: No, but some do.

REV: One writer, CASE, is handicapped. He's got a wooden leg and is missing one arm. One night he did a burner and was waiting for it to dry. Another writer, CAP, started throwing up on it. CASE hit him over the head with a pipe.

BEA: The only way to get respect is to be tough, a hard rock. Ducks don't make it. It doesn't matter how good your art is. If people can walk over you they will. Strength is the only thing that's respected.

REV: Most of the people are punks. They're just following the good illustration.

MB-1: I respect writers unless somebody goes over my tag. I'm gonna be mad at this guy. We're gonna put our name right over his, boom, boom, boom. Until you come to a settlement.

Do you get harassed by the police? WERK: One time I went to the Bench and the guys said there had been a raid and the police took all the markers and spray cans.

RALPH: There are a couple of cops, Hickey and Ski. They are like Starsky and Hutch. When they catch you they don't bust you, but they work you over. They put the cuffs on you, then they may slap you up. They ask, "You like to paint?" And then they take your paint and start spraying you with it. They cover you. It takes hours to get it off.

Do transit workers bother you? WERK: They sometimes throw wrenches at us. Sometimes the transit workers take it on themselves to rough you up.

REV: But sometimes the workers will warn us. One writer's father is a conductor and he gets us schedules.

Have you ever been caught by the police? REV: Just once. Sometimes when you're in a yard three or four trains will pull in slowly, and all of a sudden the doors will open and dozens of cops will leap out. It's everyone for himself. I try to keep one of the train workers' orange vests. I put it on and walk around like I know what I'm doing.

Is writing worth it if you could end up in jail? WERK: *Obviously. I'm doing it. So are a lot of other people.*

What about the new white cars? WERK: *They look nice, but the white paint is supposed to be real easy for the MTA to buff.*

BEA: The paint the MTA uses sheds the spray paint, so anything you put on can be buffed right off. But we discovered that if you prime it first with white spray paint, the job will last. You have to get a Fat Cap, a nozzle that turns the narrow spray into a spray 4 inches wide, so you can cover the car quickly.

Have you ever been caught? ZIM: *I got caught by some cops and lied about my age. I had my hood on so they couldn't see me good. They let me go.*

WERK: The cops let me go, too. One time a cop caught me doing a motion tag on the #1 Train. That's when you write on the train while it's moving. The cop pulled me off the train at 23rd Street and took me into the porter's room. He kept me there for awhile, but he didn't do anything. He was just trying to scare me.

ZIM: If they catch you, the older you are the worse it gets. If you're under 15 and get caught they usually just scare you, but as you get older they sometimes take you in, or make you scrub cars, or sometimes send you to jail. Most kids quit by 18.

Will you quit? ZIM: I'm thinking about quitting and going onto canvas. I'm already 18.

REV: I don't want to stop. There are gigantic school walls in my neighborhood that are blank. We want to get community support to throw up some nice murals.

Is quitting hard? REV: Writing becomes an addiction. You can't stop. Everyone you hang out with does it. The feel of the markers, the drip of the paint all become something you can't do without. No matter how many times you say you'll stop, you don't. The only way to do is to chill out slowly.

Will you do it all your life? BEA: I took the police exam and passed it.

REV: You'll probably become a transit cop. (Laughter.) I want to become an illustrator or an animator. I've got some ideas for Saturday morning cartoons, like "Fat Albert."

WERK: I'm starting to grow out of working on trains. Maybe I'll work on canvas. My father got me a job doing a candy store. I did a whole wall at 163rd Street and Union, in the Bronx.

BM-1: I'm doing more creative things on t-shirts and canvas. But sometimes when I do it on paper I feel bored. I want to see it bigger. I want everybody to see it.

Have you done anything beside trains and murals? WERK: If you can do it on something that moves, everybody will see it. I want to do an Amtrack train so the whole country could see it.

ZIM: I don't think it's been done before. It would be a first.

Why do you like graffiti? ZIM: It's art. You're expressing your talent on a wall. People who are good are really artists.

What do you think of tagging inside the subways? WERK: I'm against it more and more, although it's a lot easier and faster than working outside.

ZIM: But the inside is where you get more of your fame.

WERK: If graffiti is really art, then it doesn't belong inside, just outside.

SPIRO: It's messy on the inside. Outside it's better because people will see it more. The colors make the train look better than the dull grey.

How come nobody does nice work on the inside of cars? WERK: 'Cause seats and doors get erased really quickly and windows get buffed right away. It wouldn't last.

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Will the city ever stop graffiti? WERK: Never. There's over a thousand writers out there at any one time.

Why wasn't the campaign the city ran Last year effective; the one with posters saying, "make your mark in society, not on it?" ZIM: Graffiti writers don't care. No graffiti writers paid it any mind.

What should the city do about graffiti in public places? WERK: Work with the artists. They're never going to stop it. The city should give some good writers trains to work on.

REV: Richard Ravitch (head of the MTA) and Carol Bellamy (President of the City Council) once offered to give a couple of cars to writers, and then went back on it.

RALPH: We'd like to talk to Ravitch about that. We'd show him some plans that are so good he couldn't refuse.

(From: *New Youth Connections*, New York, March 1983)


DYRE AVE
BOWLING GREEN

Thomas Christ in conversation with Rémi Jaccard
Basel, March 24, 2021

Did you travel to New York back then because of the graffiti scene? No, I was alone in New York for a year due to my work and had no idea about that scene in the early 1980s. Because I rode the subway a lot, I began to become so interested in the background behind the tags – and, even more so, the pieces – that I started taking pictures of the cars. That was only partially possible in the Manhattan subway stations, so (contrary to much well-intentioned advice) I travelled to the Bronx on the weekend, where the trains are elevated and could thus be photographed in daylight.

What are your memories of New York City in the early 1980s? As I said, I came to the street scene of the Big Apple in a fairly clueless state, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the force and power of that alternative ghetto culture, which was at its pinnacle at that time, genuinely bowled me over. And it wasn't just the enigmatic graffiti explosion: it was also the break dancing and electric boogie. Rap culture was omnipresent, too. The harsh manner in which authorities were preparing for conflict at that time was also striking. The subway police substantially contributed to the scene's criminalization. They weren't just making arrests, they were hunting and shooting.

You mentioned a pinnacle. Does that also apply to graffiti? Absolutely! I was in the right place at the right time. In the 1970s the writings on the subway cars were still more or less clumsy. In the eighties, they achieved a pinnacle with graphic masterpieces featuring 3D effects and sophisticated fill-ins and outlines. At the same time, conflicts were becoming more intense – not just with the police and MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) but also among the gangs. There were too many gangs then, and they kept stepping on each others' feet.

So, despite all the warnings, you went to the Bronx with your camera. How did you first come into contact with writers? Did they say something to you? Yes, a teenager told me right away: you don't belong here. After some initial skepticism, though, it became clear I was a sympathizer and, above all, it became clear I understood what was driving the writers. I then became a kind of "art mediator." That meant the boys not only took me to their homes, they also showed me their black books and finally even dedicated a car to me. That's also when I saw just how precarious the conditions they were living under were. We're entirely unfamiliar with housing like that here in Switzerland. For me, it was extremely interesting that these teenage writers were by no means a violent gang or brutal machos; instead, the writer gangs were sensitive, and they experienced stage fright and fear before every one of their nocturnal raids.

Did you also come across women in the graffiti scene? Yes, but women were clearly the exception. I remember Lady Pink, who later became an artist, and one other one – I never met either in person. Of the many writers I met, about 45% were Latino, 35% African-American, and 20% white.

And what do you mean by "mediator"? The writers were clearly excited that someone from the "outside world" had become interested in their images. They never had cameras with them; after all, most of them were living in a state of poverty. What they were interested in was, above all, being seen. Everyone wants to be respected. And for these people, who lived under relatively precarious conditions and lacked any prospects, this desire was much more intense.

There were also trains they had never seen themselves, but which I had. The fact that I'd photographed them made me even more interesting. Whenever I'd taken a good picture, there was a huge hype. To have artists never seeing the pictures they had put so much effort into creating – that's absolutely unique in the history of art!

What were your thoughts about why the writers did it anyway? These trains were addressed to the people in Manhattan. They wanted the images to travel through

this city, and they wanted their own piece to be seen by as many of its millions of residents as possible. They knew perfectly well that their train would only be seen for two days – then it would be painted over again. That was directly anti-artistic, the idea that a work was to be created not for eternity but for "instant recognition."

I'd like to come back to that term again later. So how was subway graffiti received in Manhattan? Initially, the average member of the public didn't pay much attention to the graffiti. Aside from that, there were two groups: for some they were purely acts of inexplicable vandalism, but many were also fascinated by the novelty, the intensity of this wave – this wave flowing in from the outside.

That's also what fascinated me: the inside of the subway cars was scribbled full of black tags that were scarcely legible and were constantly being crossed out. The designs on the outside, on the other hand, were the product of an unbelievable amount of labor and a design concept. And this amount of labor was only made possible by working in a group. In terms of their predilection for developing a concept and planning, the exteriors were the opposite of the interiors. For the outside of a car, the groups had to meticulously prepare themselves and agree on a design.

Can you describe the atmosphere while spray painting? I was usually not on the third rail myself and didn't climb around between the trains personally. I was primarily fascinated by the graphic art. The designs was defined by an arm's length, because they didn't have any ladders. They were wedged in between two trains and never saw their images from a distance. That means they composed their sweeping lines according to what their bodies permitted. And, even though they could never view their piece from a distance, the results were smoothly steady and aesthetic.

That's another fascinating aspect: they had an aesthetic intention that could only be realized under extremely challenging conditions. They could also have calmly painted at home at their own pace, but there was an enormous kick – usually without drugs, by the way – and pressure. Furthermore, there were the fumes from the spray paint, which were also a health hazard, and the yards and tunnels were full of rats. So there were numerous difficulties to further increase the intensity (and, for me, the inexplicability) of this activity. On top of all this, there were the conflicts among the writers themselves and their struggle against the authorities, etc. They must have been incredibly strong-willed to overcome all of this just to have a colorful train travel through Manhattan for two days.

Where do you think this determination came from? The writers had an untamable desire to be noticed by a society that had completely marginalized them. That's why these New York images had such a direct power. And, of course, this outcry simultaneously expressed itself in rap and dance.

In your book it says that subway graffiti had no message but was intimately connected with these teenagers' social concerns. Can you explain the interplay between these two? In their miserable situation, these underprivileged teenagers had three possibilities: to be unemployed without any job prospects, to become criminals, or to paint. For me, to have gangs forming to make graffiti instead of to engage in violence is a unique sociological phenomenon. Using color would still have been halfway conceivable if it had just been a matter of markers, according to the motto: come on, let's mess something up. But when a cooperative and collective artwork emerges out of this – a work that's well conceived graphically and holds itself to a high standard (you're only a king if you've painted well) – then it's a manifestation of color of a kind unlike anything I've ever seen anywhere else in the world.

You say the writers were criminals, but without any desire to get rich from it ... Like all young people, they wanted esteem, respect, and prominence. And they wanted to use a violent outburst of color to express something that others did with their fists or a gun. For this purpose, they chose a medium no one had ever chosen before. In addition, the writers had to agree on a design: that means there were eight of them painting, but only one received the fame. This collaboration was a social act, and we could still learn something from it.

Of course, there was also competitive conflict and, of course, they painted over each others' work. But this conflict wasn't physical. And, naturally, there were also

major differences among the different writer gangs: one was really almost civilized and well-ordered, another was harsh and hierarchical. Anyone who wanted to join as a new member, for example, first had to steal cans of spray paint as an initiation test. It was more a question of artistic talent in other writer gangs.

Which writers particularly caught your attention? I can't precisely say anymore, but I still remember POEM, MIDG, RAZE, NICER, KEN, and DAZE distinctly. I actually also personally met all the writers who appear in my book more than once. And not one of them was a violent type – I still find it unbelievable that they said: "We are a gang but we're hitting cars." With paint and not with blood!

And the ones you've named weren't alone in that ... Absolutely. Subway graffiti would only have been half as interesting if it hadn't become a mass movement of this kind. The crazy thing is that there were a thousand writers then. And, even at the time, people were already asking them (see the interview with the *Vandals in Control*) about what would happen if the police gained the upper hand. Their answer was: they have no chance, there are too many of us writing.
Now was that a blessing or a curse? Some said they were vandals ruining our society. For others it was a blessing, because if they were painting, they weren't killing anyone. That's an exaggeration of course, but this contrast is very fascinating. For me, it's clear: if aesthetics were to become a deciding criterion, that would obviously be an ideal world! Back then, you only had a chance if your style was beautiful; you'd only be allowed into the hall of fame if you were good. There the rule was "strictly kings or better" – and it was respected. It's also astounding that rules like these became established. Later, the battle for territory became tougher and tougher and things increasingly became about being strong and having power.

So was it more about impressing the other writers, or did the writers want to make beautiful images for everyone? That's a good question. I'd say both. Naturally, they were primarily painting for themselves. However, it was simultaneously clear that the subway was such an appalling place – dirty, gray, and rusty – that they really were convinced they were making New York better and more beautiful.

When did you decide to make your first book, Subway Graffiti? I met a journalist who noticed I had great visual material. She said that what I had there was unique, that I absolutely had to do something with it. So I got a little nudge to help get me started, because I hadn't planned to go to the Bronx to make a book. It just turned out that way. The Big Apple was electric in the early eighties! If you were the least bit sensitive, that couldn't fail to leave its mark on you.
I was convinced back then and am still convinced today that the graffiti movement is a unique art historical phenomenon that can scarcely be fit into traditional categories. I also knew back then that I had a unique collection of images of this ephemeral art, and so I thought it would surely be sufficient to record the works and provide a text to accompany them.

You mention the text. At this point, I'd like to discuss your reflections on the three terms "instant production/reception/recognition." I wanted to use these three terms to point to the singularity and ephemerality of the scene; as in the case of urban graffiti, it's not about the preservability of art but the direct and immediate experience of it in the present.
Interestingly, recent decades have led to an entirely different insight. The vibrant graffiti scene spread around the entire world like a fungus, almost like a pandemic – in every major city from London to Moscow. While the style has sometimes become somewhat cleaner technically, there has been amazingly little development in terms of content over the last forty years. Instead, it has repeatedly been copied, repeatedly served anew as a platform for self-identification among similarly marginalized, but also romanticized groups. In the meantime, certain forms of lettering have also gained substantial cultural cachet and, accordingly, been incorporated by the advertising industry.

Can you explain your statement that graffiti is simultaneously "a means of self-realization as well as a way of fighting for survival"? The unique and striking aspect of this movement is precisely the fact that it primarily deals not with artworks by intellectual or even

academically trained artists but with the outcry of a socially underprivileged class in a heterogeneous and starkly ghettoized society. At the same time, it's essential to understand that it wasn't primarily about a sociopolitical message: you practically never saw political demands. Instead, it was about a strikingly designed representation of one's own brand, which was brought into visual circulation like the trademark of a giant corporation. Sociopolitical content was more likely to be conveyed through the parallel rap scene.

You wrote that "urban works cannot be commercialized or preserved." How do you see the status of photography, then? It's fascinating to me that the art scene also seeks out spaces that elude a simple and sometimes dubious commercialization. Within the public space, there is art that will scarcely find its way into the galleries but offers far more food for thought – in spite of, or perhaps directly because of, the fact that no one can buy it. Here, photography offers a documentary means to bridge this gap or even to further enhance the work's public availability.

Did you know about other books or films on graffiti? No, I didn't discover most of the books and films until years later. I had seen a few of Henry Chalfant's pictures, where you can never see an entire car – everything is cut off and shot from the hip. But it's important to show viewers the subway cars in their entirety and straight on. I considered my pictures to be of better quality because of that, since I photographed the cars parallel to the picture plane.

Was *Subway Graffiti* also distributed in the US? No, it wasn't actively marketed – after my return to Switzerland, I wasn't very active about taking care of its distribution and marketing. In Europe, though, my little book was the only one available on this topic for a long time.
That's also what led to the later photo exhibition at Basel's museum of applied arts, where Prof. Frank Vischer – who was president of the Basler Kunstverein at that time – gave a speech on graffiti art. I was very moved by his consent because I was, of course, aware that graffiti art wasn't for everyone – particularly at that time.

Your book nevertheless left its mark on the Basel graffiti scene. Were you aware back then of what you (and others) had initiated in Switzerland? No, it was never my intention to bring graffiti to Switzerland. And I had no idea back then that the echo could be so strong. It was a big surprise when, years later, the Basel writer DARE rang my doorbell and asked: Are you the one with the photos? That book is my Bible! I told him to stop exaggerating, but he stuck to what he'd said. And, in fact, I did recognize a lot of styles from my book along Basel's line. It was only some time later that the graffiti scene's impact on the whole of Europe became clear to me.
And just this year, I learned Black Tiger had seen and been influenced by my exhibition back then. He mentioned me in a Schweizer Radio (SRF) show about thirty years of rap in Swiss German. Asked how he'd gotten into graffiti, Black Tiger answered that his mother had taken him with her to the Gewerbemuseum when he was twelve – and he'd seen pictures there by someone named Thomas Christ. He could still remember my name! Through graffiti, he then arrived at rap and became one of the pioneers of Switzerland's *Mundartrap*.

Do you know what's become of the writers you met back then? No, I lost contact with them after I returned to Switzerland. For about a year, letters would still occasionally arrive, and then that also came to an end. Professionally, I had a lot to do, and I turned my attention to other topics.
As far as I can remember, one of them wanted to become a police officer, one wanted to get into the graphic art scene. All of them were looking for something. A lot of them stopped at eighteen, you know. Until then, they would get off with a few days of cleaning but, once they were eighteen, it meant jail time.
Most of their biographies surely don't lead into the art scene, but there were also a few, like FUTURA, who got picked up by galleries. People were so fascinated with the graffiti movement that a few galleries immediately tried to jump on the bandwagon, but ultimately with little success – the scene couldn't be commercially preserved. In the 1980s graffiti could even be seen at the Art Basel. I also know people who hung sheets of metal like that in the dining rooms of their homes: I call that cultural castration – that no longer had anything to do with subway graffiti.



But when a writer had the chance to exhibit in a gallery, wasn't that a logical continuation of this will to get out and to be seen? Maybe I was a little too harsh with the term cultural castration. But it really was the case that these artists no longer had the same drive when they were doing commercial work. I'm sure they still wanted to express something that was weighing on their heart, but that direct, uncommercial motivation was missing.

So aesthetics became compromised by the financial considerations at the back of their mind? If you took someone out of that context and told them: make that again for me, for my customers, for yourself – but smaller please, so it would also fit into a living room. Something different emerges then: you make concessions to your audience or the gallery. That brings us back to a different, larger theme – namely, whether art and capital are compatible with one another at all. And that would take us way off topic.

Would you say, then, that someone like Keith Haring, who went to art school, had an advantage and was in a position to adapt to different contexts? In the beginning, Haring's pictures were indeed clearly noncommercial. They were also "instant": he wanted the same conditions of production and reception as the writers – it was about energy. Later on, he played excessively with the reproducibility of his art, and that became an aspect of his concept. That was his idea, something he proactively adopted. So he shifted from the noncommercial to the hyper-commercial. Haring defined his career for himself. And that's what the graffiti artists of that time didn't do: others made their decisions for them. The difference is whether someone is part of the decision-making process or becomes a victim of the art business. Haring thought a lot about what role he was playing within this drama.

So the fact that Haring was commercially successful didn't surprise you? You'll laugh. I talked with him about that and he told me: You know what? I'm a lucky duck. There were a hundred talented students at my art school – there were others who had just as much right to it. He said he didn't know why the hype – which was enormous – had become fixated on him. He was a very modest guy. And he wanted to express how much of a role chance plays in who gets noticed and who doesn't.

I'm sure that's true, but the intensity with which Haring drew in the public space – that really was extraordinary. Yes, I also told him that. But he said: you're mistaken, there were a lot of people like me – lots of people with super ideas, who also tried to draw attention to themselves with their tag, their profile. But Haring – with his hand, his message – was simply understood. Indeed, he had developed a metalanguage with his little men and little dogs.

That already places us right in the midst of your second book's topic. What led to Urban Graffiti? For me, it's important that *Subway Graffiti* and *Urban Graffiti* are two worlds that have almost nothing to do with one another. Their impetus and expressive power have entirely different origins. I absolutely wanted to make a second book in order to show these differences. Urban graffiti is created by art-school graduates and its aspirations are related to the artistic developments of the last 500 years. Its creators nevertheless remain loners in their work and individually interpretable in their statements. Subway graffiti, on the other hand, isn't painted by artists in this sense.
I also could have made a book about Harald Naegeli, but I deliberately wanted to stick with the New York scene. It was often thrown together with subway graffiti there, because Haring was also active in the subway. It was important to me to show that it had a different philosophy behind it.

Are there also parallels between subway graffiti and urban graffiti? The common denominator is that we're dealing with art in the public space. Instant recognition encapsulates this: both of them present themselves directly to the public and seek immediate and direct attention. I incorporated this into my discussion of instant art – the direct immediacy of their creation and perception. As I said, the message is different, but Haring also drove ephemerality to an extreme. He used chalk, after all, and there is nothing more impermanent than that; he deliberately wanted to avoid destroying anything. It was as if these black posters were there for him, although they were just empty advertising panels. He then used them

to draw in a more or less legal manner, but nonetheless in the subway, where as many people as possible would see his pictures. Those were the parallels: it's seen by many and is short-lived.

How did Haring attract your attention for the first time? I actually ran into Haring in New York's subways – a very sensitive, single-minded, and modest person. He appeared to be virtually the antithesis of the writers, using his white chalk to draw figures on the ground or on the black (unused) billboards in the subway stations. Later, I also visited him in his home in Manhattan. There was a camping tent set up in the middle of his little living room, and he seemed to spend the night there. At that time, he asked me to come back and bring him a picture of a subway car that had been painted white, which he then completed by adding his little black men – he would have loved to paint a car of his own for himself, but it never happened. That was something he really regretted. Haring felt a strong affinity for the subway writers; he admired them for their courage and their designs.

And what was it like with Richard Hambleton? New York is also where I became familiar with Hambleton's works – these wonderful, flying men who jump off the wall. Or also those nocturnal niches full of shadow figures. But I never met him in person.

So you never saw Hambleton painting live? No, but his friends described to me how he would throw up his pictures. Hambleton always had a bucket of black paint on his belt and a big brush and then – swoosh – it was done. In a few minutes, one of those things was on the wall. That was also the antithesis of Haring, who drew clearly and appealingly with his white chalk so that his message was visible and comprehensible. With Hambleton, it was more of an explosion.

You later also photographed his works in Basel ... Yes, that was a big surprise! When I came back to Basel from New York, I saw – to my great astonishment – that there was also a Hambleton lingering around the corner there. It was clear I had to photograph it, but there were only three or four. Then he travelled on through Germany and disappeared again as quickly as he'd come.

Did that have the same effect for you as in New York or did something change through the changed context? First I thought: ha, he's here too! But that's a good question. Like with the trains, it was more of a déjà vu for me – the feeling that it was already familiar – instead of its possessing the same power it had previously held in New York.

You've also taken a critical stance towards graffiti's transfer to Europe. I enjoy every clever piece, but I've also noticed it doesn't do much for me anymore. On the one hand, I'd say: if there's so much enthusiasm, then it's also honest, then they should do it. But the fascination of New York is gone. I felt that intensity was missing in the Swiss stations. It was a pale imitation. Although I have to say that there are a few writers who are very good technically – they do have skills.

Do you see things similarly with regard to urban graffiti? Ah, that's precisely the point! Someone like Banksy or Haring or Naegeli – their subject matter doesn't get copied, they're unique in that. Anyone who sees a Banksy immediately knows that it's a Banksy – or that it's an imitator. There's an authenticity there that doesn't get imitated. If somebody wants to make a name for themselves, something new needs to be invented. A new idea that's distinctively recognizable. That's what I feel is missing in today's subway graffiti but not in contemporary urban graffiti. There are also good things and bad things there, but at least they're new.

After the two books and the exhibition, did you turn your attention to other topics? I'm a very inconstant person. I was in Russia a lot and occupied myself with socialist realism – which is also a form of propaganda. Before Stalin, after all, wall paintings were a state-supported form of culture. So I turned my attention to these public paintings in Russia and made another book. But I also travelled a lot and continued to take pictures in every city.

Is there something you'd judge differently from today's perspective? No, to a certain extent, you have to accept the singularity of certain developments and remain as open and curious as possible regarding new things. Of course I'm fascinated by the fact that the

scene exploded the way it did in England and Holland, but I've scarcely experienced anything comparable to the intensity and singularity of my experiences back then in New York.

Both subway graffiti and urban graffiti are about color, brand, attention, and recognizability. However, the branding of subway graffiti is about a brand that sometimes isn't even legible. Urban graffiti is additionally about a message – politics and opposition. The others don't want that.

I don't know of any similar movement in social or art history that could seriously be compared with it. There are political wall paintings everywhere, but this colorful and largely abstract explosion, which even subjected itself to several technical and aesthetic rules, is presumably one of a kind.

Einladung zur Fotoausstellung
und Buchvernissage

Pauschalfrankiert

Subway Graffiti in New York

von Thomas Christ

Vernissage Montag, 13. August 1984, 18.15 Uhr

Begrüssung: Direktor Hans Hartmann
Einführung: Prof. Dr. iur. Frank Vischer

Zur Vernissage erscheint ein Fotobuch mit
56 Farbabbildungen und Text von Thomas Christ

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GEWERBEMUSEUM BASEL

14. August bis 16. September 1984

Öffnungszeiten:
Dienstag bis Sonntag, 10–12, 14–17 Uhr
Montag geschlossen.

Exhibition at the Gewerbemuseum Basel

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14. Aug.–16. Sept. 1984

Thomas Christ

Subway Graffiti in New York

Lebenslauf

Thomas Christ, 1953 in Zürich geboren, lebt seit 1973 in Basel, wo er seine Studien an der juristischen Fakultät mit einer Doktorarbeit über das Urheberrecht der Filmschaffenden erfolgreich abschloss.

Sein besonderes Interesse für das Visuelle findet schon seit seiner Zürcher Zeit in Zeichnungen, Photocollagen, -montagen und Photoserien seinen Ausdruck. Während zahlreicher Reisen faszinierten ihn immer wieder die arrangierten Wirklichkeiten der grossen Filmstädte, deren effekthascherische Kurzlebigkeit er in Rom, Moskau, Hollywood und Tokio photographisch festhielt (Basler Magazin 1979). Während eines Aufenthaltes in der Volksrepublik China im Jahre 1983 ist Thomas Christ bei Dreharbeiten nördlich von Peking auch mit einer kleineren Rolle betraut worden.

Zu den künstlerisch erfolgreichsten Serien zählen seine Arbeiten zum Thema «Schaufensterspiegelungen» aus den Jahren 1974–1979, erschienen 1980 bei der Galerie von Bartha in Basel, sowie seine soeben veröffentlichte Sammlung New Yorker Subway Graffiti, eine sowohl künstlerisch wie soziologisch bedeutende Dokumentation aus den Bronx.

In Bearbeitung liegt überdies eine synoptische Ausgabe zu Piranesis Römer Veduten, eine photographische Vergleichsstudie.

Ausstellungen in Zürich und Basel.

Biography

Thomas Christ was born in Zurich in 1953. Since 1973 he has lived in Basel, where he successfully completed his PhD in law with a dissertation on the intellectual property rights of those involved in filmmaking.

His special interest in the visual had already begun expressing itself while he was still in Zurich in the form of drawings, photocollages, photomontages, and photo series. During his extensive travels, he repeatedly became fascinated with the arranged realities of major centers of the film industry and has used his camera to capture their sensationalistic ephemerality in Rome, Moscow, Hollywood, and Tokyo (*Basler Magazin*, 1979). While staying in the People's Republic of China in 1983, Christ was even entrusted with a minor role in a film being shot north of Peking.

His most artistically successful series include his photos depicting display window reflections – shot from 1974 to 1979 and published in 1980 by the Galerie von Bartha in Basel under the title *Schaufensterspiegelungen* – and his just recently published collection *Subway Graffiti: New York*, which is an artistically as well as sociologically significant documentation of the Bronx.

In addition, a volume presenting a photographic comparative study of Piranesi's Roman vedute is currently in progress.

Exhibitions in Zurich and Basel.

VERBEMU

FOTOGALERIE

ESTALTUNG

Thomas Christ

Es ist sicherlich kein Zufall, dass Thomas Christ gerade die New Yorker Subway-Graffiti zum Thema seiner neuesten Photoreportage gemacht hat. Anders als die meisten Photographen, die im New Yorker Stadtzentrum ein paar plakative U-Bahn-Wagen ablichten, hat sich Thomas Christ ein halbes Jahr Zeit genommen, in die Szene einzudringen und die Subway Yards im Armenviertel Bronx zu erwandern.

Gerade seine Hartnäckigkeit und seine Begeisterungsfähigkeit eröffnen ihm immer wieder dem Normalbürger verschlossene Welten, wie die jugendlichen Subkulturen von Moskau, die beinahe zufällige Teilnahme an einem Filmprojekt mit der chinesischen Volksarmee oder das hautnahe Erleben jenes scheinbar zweckfreien und aussichtslosen Überlebenskampfes jugendlicher U-Bahn-Sprayer der Bronx. Wenn von Thomas Christ wie von den Subway-Malern gesagt werden kann, dass der «Egotrip» gelegentlich wichtiger sei als die «social message», so ist dies wohl eine der Voraussetzungen seiner vielseitigen künstlerischen Begabungen und Interessen.

Thomas Christ ist ein ebenso guter Zeichner wie Photograph. Gerade seine zeichnerischen Fähigkeiten verhelfen ihm zu jenem subtilen Sehen, das den grossen technischen Aufwand gar nicht nötig hat. Photographieren ist für ihn wie malen. Seine künstlerische Sensibilität wird abgerundet durch eine ausgeprägte Musikalität, die insbesondere in seinen «Spiegelungen» zum Ausdruck kommt.

Seine Arbeiten weisen eine erstaunliche Bandbreite auf, sie zeugen ebensosehr von seinen kunstgeschichtlichen Interessen (Piranesistudie) wie von einem Flair für Situationskomik (Photocollagen).

Man mag es bedauern, dass der gelernte Jurist und Spediteur so viel Zeit für seine Brotberufe aufwenden muss, sie vermitteln ihm andererseits sicherlich viel von seiner Energie.

Mark Pieth

Thomas Christ

It is surely no coincidence that Thomas Christ just chose New York's subway graffiti as the subject of his latest series of documentary photographs. Unlike most photographers, who shoot a few eye-catching subway cars in downtown New York, Christ gave himself half a year to find his way into the scene and to explore the subway yards in the slums of the Bronx.

It is precisely his persistence and capacity for enthusiasm that have repeatedly opened worlds to him that are closed to the average citizen, such as the youth subcultures of Moscow, his almost coincidental participation in a film project of the People's Army of China, or his intimate experience of the seemingly purposeless and hopeless battle for survival of the Bronx's teenage subway writers. If we can say of Christ as well as the subway painters that their "ego trip" was occasionally more important than their "social message," this was presumably also among the prerequisites for his diverse artistic talents and interests.

Christ is as good at drawing as photography. And this graphic talent is precisely what helps him to achieve that subtle vision which has no need at all for any highly elaborate technical element. For him, photography is like painting. His artistic sensibility is rounded off through a pronounced musicality that finds expression in his reflections, in particular.

His works display an amazing breadth and are just as much a testament to his art historical interests (Piranesi study) as to his flair for situational comedy (photocollages).

It is perhaps regrettable that this lawyer and shipping executive has to spend so much time on his day jobs; on the other hand, they surely provide him with much of his energy.

Mark Pieth

Thomas Christ: New York – Subway Graffiti

Thomas Christ was my student in the realm of jurisprudence. He wrote a widely noted doctoral dissertation on the subject of intellectual property law. He works as a legal consultant for a major shipping company and, as a photographer, he has combined his professional travels, including stays abroad, with an alert and hypersensitive receptiveness and eye, with intelligence and a sense for the exceptional in art, and with extensive art historical knowledge. His photobook about New York's subway graffiti as well as his earlier book *Objets d'Art* offer striking demonstrations of this.

As a law professor, I cannot provide a well-founded analysis of the phenomena presented here on the basis of art historical expertise. I can only say that I am impressed by the pictures: their formal power, their often provocative austerity, their spontaneity. Everyone will agree with me that the label post-pop art is a weak way of classifying the art depicted here and is, at most, a means for art historians to satisfy their drive to pigeonhole ever artistic phenomenon.

Looking at the pictures, the following four thoughts came into my head:

1. These "sprayed" images were introduced by teenage gangs: a West Side story featuring harsh and competitive conflict among gangs. Many of their members are Puerto Ricans, an ethnic minority that is also prominent in youth criminality and has an ambivalent relationship to the American Establishment. It is astounding that group competition and the struggle to emerge as the greatest, this by no means friendly contention, play out in the artistic realm – that competition thus possesses the means to compose form. This phenomenon is reminiscent of tribal culture and tribal feuds, finding artistic expression in tattoos, tribal identification: war with war paint. "That's fame. It feels good," says one, "You may feel like doing something like killing somebody."

2. "Spraying" the subway cars is a nocturnal endeavor under extreme conditions: confronted with the threat of being caught and facing harsh legal consequences as well as physical dangers – the public authorities use live ammunition, the police dogs are relentless, and there are multiple entanglements of murderous barbed wire ... "Yeah, a couple of times we almost got shot." There is also enormous pressure due to a lack of time: the work has to be completed within a few hours of the night. The aspect of danger, which naturally exists because of the activity's illegality, plays a substantial role. These extreme conditions lead to greater intensity, to a peak artistic performance: the merciless competition would be inconceivable without the aspect of danger – the altercation between gangs would lack the extremely important element of the test of courage. Some of them have been caught and punished harshly by our standards, landing behind bars in spite of their young age. No groups of intellectuals have championed them, no one has made these sinners into national heroes or resistance fighters against the world around them and the drab gray of everyday life, no one has called for attention to declare that their artistic efforts and artworks demand the state's renunciation of its right to sentence them. And how much more primal, powerful, and pioneering this graffiti is than Naegeli's figures. And, despite the risk of provoking outrage, I permit myself the question: When Naegeli carried out his nocturnal forays through Zurich, was he not also aware of their illegality and danger, and was it not this element that first inspired him to create his works? And is it not the task of the state – if I may put it like this – to play along and, thus, to punish? (Although the sentence of the Zurich verdict is an entirely different question!)

3. Anyone who views this subway graffiti is profoundly amazed by the way in which these "works" take their rightful place alongside those created by professional artists and how they contribute to the development of art movements – or even anticipate them. Did associations with artists of the highest rank and renown not come to mind as we gazed at the subway cars? We must nonetheless assume that these adolescents were unfamiliar with those works, did not spend their free time at MoMA or in galleries, and that they received a modest education at school. Of course, there is no lack of explanations of a scholarly kind, but none are convincing. This thoroughly primal art created in the dead of night and un-

der the threat of death has its own ethnic roots, which have now been confronted with and mingled with the impressions of their environment. Nonetheless, the awareness that an artwork is being created is always present. "People who are good are really artists!"

4. Naturally, the art establishment has pounced on this astounding and overwhelming body of work. It is being commercialized. Graffiti artists are being flown in for the Art Basel, banks and businesses are paying good money to have their lobbies decorated, and collectors and even museums are appearing on the scene. Suddenly the exceptional, extraordinary, stunning effect is gone: what remains are interesting, but – in a certain sense – harmless works! And we feel like we are in an ethnological museum, confronted with totems, masks, and textiles. Our friend Naegeli also exemplifies this: his little men become poignant in the gallery, he must feel frustrated as an instructor at a public art academy, and I can imagine his students, who are now assigned the artistic task of creating stick men. It is also interesting that New York City's campaign "Make your mark in society, not on it" was completely rejected by genuine graffiti artists: "No graffiti painter paid it any mind." And rightly so, after all.
In the end, photography is able to capture the exceptional. I find Thomas Christ's photographic work so outstanding precisely because it allows us to get inside the creation of subway graffiti artworks and because it brilliantly, but dispassionately records the events, the works, and their spirit as simultaneously a "means of self-realization as well as a way of fighting for survival." It is dedicated and distanced at the same time and, photographically, it is of superior quality. I would like to congratulate the Gewerbemuseum on its decision to exhibit these pictures. And I also congratulate Thomas Christ for his extraordinary accomplishment.

Gewerbemuseum, August 13, 1984, by Frank Vischer

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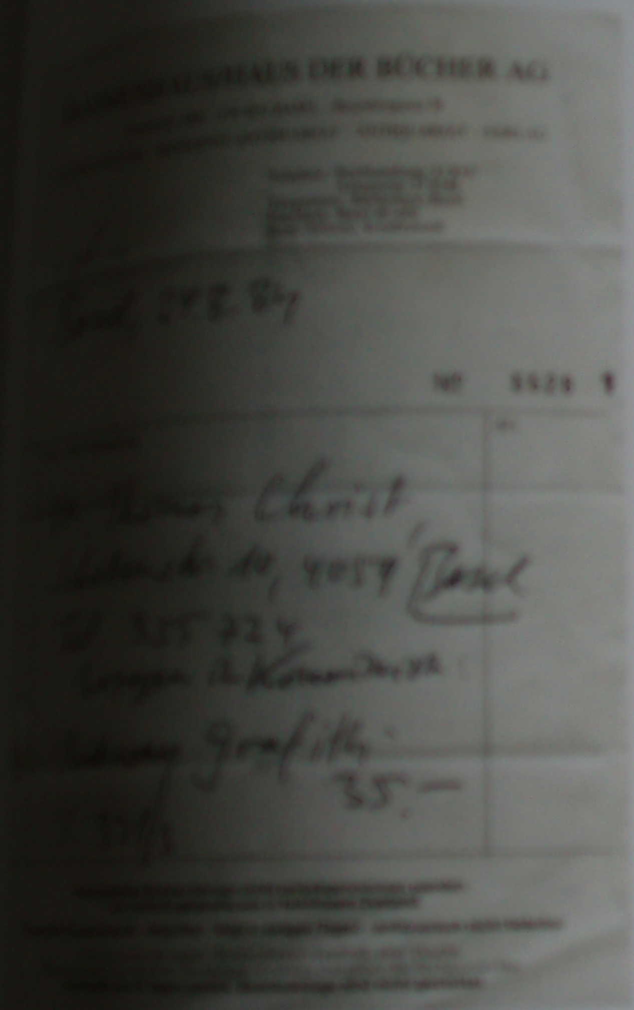
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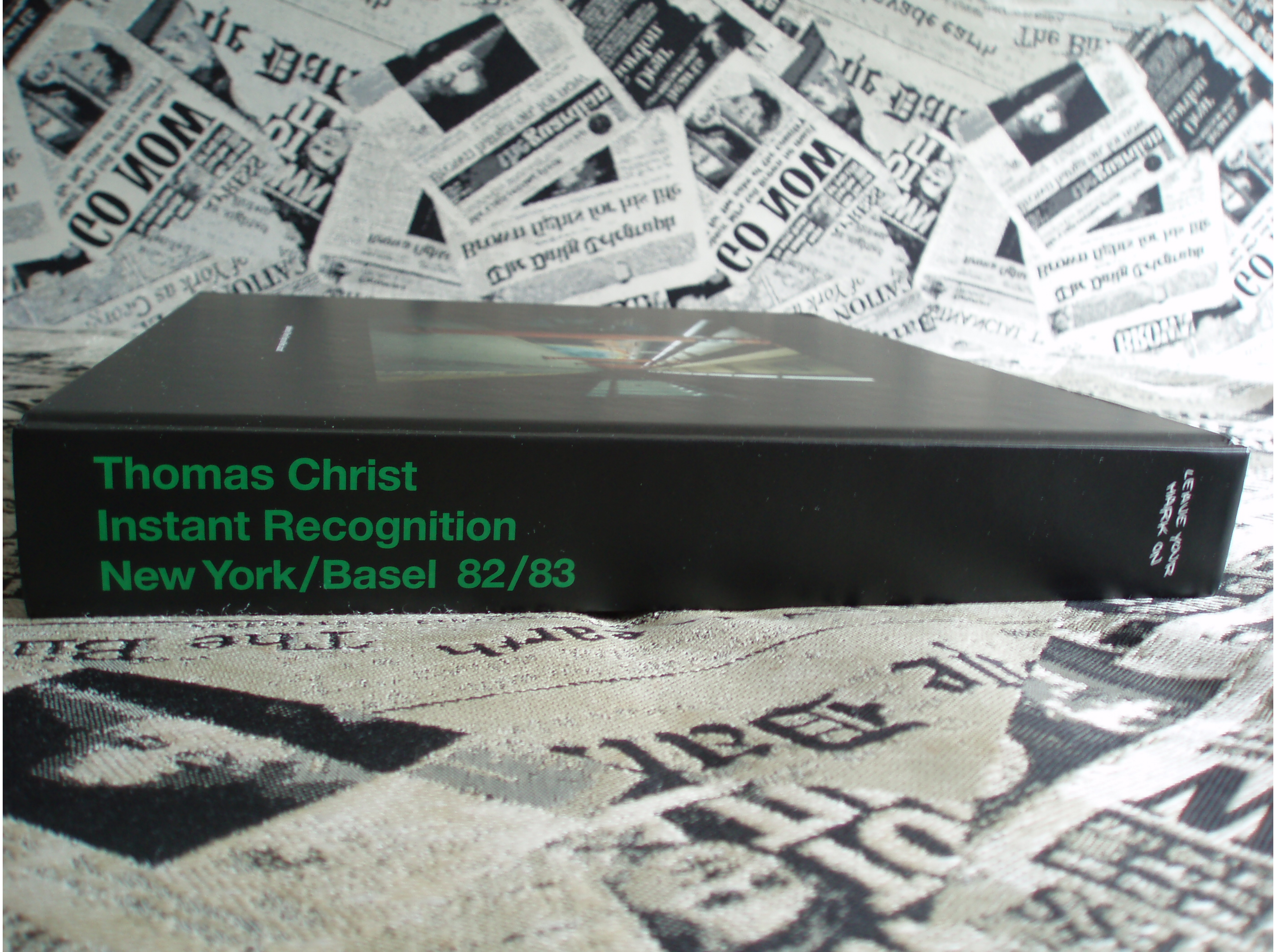
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Graphic Design:	Thierry Furger	thierryfurger.ch
Photo editing:	Herbert Böhler	luftbild.ch
Translation:	Michael Wetzel	kunstuebersetzer.de
Publishing house:	Nonstop Publishing	nonstopmagazine.ch
Printing house:	Gutenberg Beuys	feindruckerei.de
ISBN:	978-3-033-09702-5	

With the friendly support of:
Claire Sturzenegger-Jeanfavre Stiftung
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